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Political Forms of Infinity in Contemporary Ecopoetry and Ecofiction

Why We Read in a Time of Crisis

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Master's Thesis in English Literature, ENG-3992, May 2023

“Picture the beach at low tide. Three different approaches are possible. The Apollonian man builds elaborate sandcastles, throwing himself into his activity as his creations would last forever, totally oblivious to the incoming tide which will demolish his productions. Here is someone who ignores reality and is therefore continually surprised, battered, and bruised by it. The Dionysian man sees the inevitability of the levelling tide and therefore builds no castles. His constant preoccupation with the ephemeral nature of his life and his creations allows him no psychic space in which to live and play. He will only build if his productions are assured of immortality, but unlike the Apollonian man, he suffers no delusions in this regard. Here is someone tyrannized and depleted by reality. The third option is Nietzsche’s tragic man, aware of the tide and the transitory nature of his productions, yet building his sandcastles nevertheless. The inevitable limitations of reality do not dim the passion with which he builds his castles; in fact, the inexorable realities add a poignancy and sweetness to his passion. The tragicomic play in which our third man builds, Nietzsche suggests, is the richest form of life, generating the deepest meaning from the dialectical interplay of illusion and reality” (Mitchell 1988: 194-195).

“*Don’t worry*, the doomed tubular creatures told us. *There are two kinds of ‘endless.’ Ours is the better one*” (Powers 2021: 152).

Abstract

Why read poetry and fiction when the world is burning, drowning, and quaking? This thesis seeks to provide an answer by arguing for the political efficacy of contemporary ecopoetry and ecofiction. Instead of viewing reading as an escape from ecopolitical struggles, I show the limited but productive role of literature in a time of crisis. Read together, Juliana Spahr's book of poetry *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005) and Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) illuminate the coordinates by which a viable response to the crisis must abide. The thesis centers around the question of finitude, especially how to relate to ecological limits and political forms. By drawing on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's true infinity and Anna Kornbluh's political formalism, I argue that we must reconceive the limits of nature not as external barriers to be overcome but as internal to any social order at all. Through a politically formalist examination of Spahr's ecopoetry and Ghosh's ecofiction, this thesis demonstrates the need for critiquing existing structures not to tear everything down but to imagine how future forms may be built differently.

Acknowledgements

Master's theses list only one author, but mine could never have been written in isolation.

Thank you to Cassie for being a phenomenal supervisor and a wonderful human being. Your perceptive feedback and precise comments have undoubtedly improved the quality of the bigger picture and the finer details. More importantly, I admire your unique combination of academic rigor, intellectual enthusiasm, and unconditional generosity.

I have also learnt a lot from all the other professors whose classes I have taken at UiT. Otherwise, I would not have been familiar with many of my now favorite books.

Thanks to all the members of the Interdisciplinary Phenomenology research group. I deeply appreciate the group's commitment to preserving core academic and intellectual values.

A meaningful but sometimes stressful life requires supportive friends. Hegel may be onto something when he uses friendship as an example of freedom. Special thanks to Sivert who regularly makes time for reading difficult thinkers like Hegel.

Lastly, thank you to Kjell for being who you are. That you are the best father imaginable is something for which I am infinitely grateful.

Abbreviations

When citing Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, I use the abbreviations *TCEL* and *HT* respectively.

For works by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, I employ the following abbreviations:

Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, vol. 1	*A1*
Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, vol. 2	*A2*
Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part I: Science of Logic	*EL*
Early Theological Writings	*ETW*
Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy	*ILHP*
Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Vol III, The Consummate Religion	*LPR3*
Philosophy of Nature	*PN*
Outlines of the Philosophy of Right	*PR*
The Phenomenology of Spirit	*PS*
The Science of Logic	*SL*

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Introduction

Why read poetry and fiction when the world is burning, drowning, and quaking? This thesis seeks to provide an answer. The planetary ecological crisis affects everyone on this planet, but in radically uneven ways. Rising sea levels, mass extinction of species, and more extreme weather events like heat waves or cyclones are here to stay for the foreseeable future. Is there anything we can do about this? In a time of crisis, it might be tempting for the literarily inclined of us to read poetry or fiction as temporary relief from the dire state of the world. However, there are other ways to frame reading in a time of crisis. Instead of celebrating reading as an escapist endeavor, this thesis argues for the political efficacy of contemporary ecopoetry and ecofiction, exemplified by Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004). These books illuminate the coordinates by which a viable response to our current crisis must abide. To that end, I draw on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's true infinity and Anna Kornbluh's political formalism to show how Spahr's ecopoetry and Ghosh's ecofiction model truly infinite forms of ecopolitics for a time of crisis.

This Connection of Everyone with Lungs is a work of lyric poetry, stylized as a diary, that Spahr wrote in the period between 11 September 2001 and late March 2003, when the U.S. invasion of Iraq had just begun. Part love poem, part breathing exercise, part political critique, the book relates the complex historical situation of the early 21st century, a period filled with wars and growing awareness about the planetary ecological crisis. Mostly written in a prose poetical form, the book meditates on the connections between all the personal, political, and ecological issues which Spahr experiences as an American at the start of the 21st century. Throughout, she recognizes that even intimate moments with her beloveds are infused with disturbing thoughts about war and the destruction of nature. Implicating her readers as breathing beings in the first part, Spahr suggests the universal nature of the crisis. The second and longer part of the book catalogues Spahr's everyday life from when she realized that the U.S. would invade Iraq until the invasion was initiated. Relating the news about political protests opposing the coming war, Spahr calls attention to the glimmers of individuals discernible in the crowds, thereby highlighting the singularity of every living being.

The Hungry Tide is a realist novel set in the Sundarbans, a region located in the borderlands between India and Bangladesh. The main story takes place a couple decades after

the Morichjhãpi massacre (1979). More than 17,000 Dalit refugees died during a forced eviction, enacted because they had allegedly occupied an area of tiger conservation. Centering around the relation between humans and other animals in the region, the novel critiques conservationists who neglect the lives of poor people like all the fishermen being killed by tigers every year in the Sundarbans. Ghosh presents a clear contrast between the utopian cooperatives established by the real-life English businessman Sir Daniel Hamilton in the 1930s and the Babadon Development Trust (BDT) built by Nilima, one of the characters in the novel. The contrast between Hamilton's utopianism, idealized by Nilima's husband, Nirmal, and Nilima's pragmatism illustrates conflicting visions of politics in a time of crisis. Instead of giving up on social life, Nilima pragmatically insists on the need for building better to make a limited but therefore significant contribution to the well-being of people in the region.

Writing about specific literary texts requires acts of delimitation. There is a wide range of possible texts which could fit into this project. The core criteria for selection would be that the texts are written in the late 20th to early 21st century and that they focus on the relation between nature and society to demonstrate the mediating role of social forms. Possible texts could range from sci-fi stories about colonizing or terraforming other planets to postcolonial novels about protesters fighting fossil extraction in the Global South to ecopoems lamenting the disappearance of wildlife. My own background as a reader sets limits for what books I can write about. The texts I have chosen foreground different but important dimensions of the planetary ecological crisis, while simultaneously showing the constructedness of existing forms in different ways. By choosing one book of poetry and one novel, I intend to show that the theoretical framework I develop is applicable to both poetry and fiction. Within their respective spheres of influence—American ecopoetry and postcolonial ecofiction—*This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and *The Hungry Tide* are widely read and discussed. Their popularity is one of the main reasons why I have chosen these books. This allows me to identify certain general tendencies in ecocriticism that are visible in the more specific criticism on Spahr and Ghosh respectively, which I elaborate upon in chapters 2 and 3. My intervention thus operates on a general level of ecocriticism but equally on the specific level of Spahr and Ghosh criticism.

In chapter 1, I develop my account of the connection between true infinity and political formalism, and I demonstrate their relevance for contemporary ecopolitics and ecocriticism. For now, it is worth briefly mentioning that true infinity is a complex and potentially misleading

concept, which has spawned a wide variety of interpretations among Hegel scholars. In short, true infinity is not limitlessness, which is the commonsense conception of infinity. By contrast, Hegel's concept foregrounds the constitutive dimension of internal limits. True infinity is an inherently self-limiting operation. Several Hegel scholars have emphasized the logical and theological dimensions of Hegel's logic of (in)finitude.[1] Others have theorized the relevance of true infinity for other fields, such as contemporary theoretical biology and theoretical physics.[2] This diversity in applications and interpretations of true infinity illustrates the centrality of the concept in Hegel's philosophy but equally its potential adaptation for other fields. In this thesis, I emphasize the social and political implications of true infinity as a theory of political freedom in an ecocritical context. On the philosophical level, I argue that true infinity indicates how we must reconceive our relation to finitude in a time of planetary ecological crisis. To that end, I devote chapter 1 to developing a framework which forges a connection between true infinity and political formalism, the latter articulated by literary theorist Anna Kornbluh.[3] Political formalism insists on the contingency of particular forms yet simultaneously affirms the necessity of forms for human sociality, and it highlights literature as a uniquely human practice. We can only be free within social collectives and literature requires some formal configuration.

Political formalism consists not in an abstract act of embracing forms but involves a concrete investigation of the constructedness of existing structures to imagine how we may build differently. Hegel's true infinity makes possible the theorization of freedom as not opposed to formal structures but arising only within composed relationality—what Kornbluh asserts is the minimal definition of form (Kornbluh 2019: 4). I adapt this framework to contemporary ecocritical debates. To that end, I argue that responding to the planetary ecological crisis requires a robust theorization of our relation to finitude and social forms. In my view, several widespread ecocritical frameworks are positively harmful for articulating how

[1] The theological undertones and implications of true infinity have been discussed by, among others, Wallace (2005), Williams (2011; 2012; 2017), and Agar (2015). The relevance of true infinity for mathematics and formal logic has been explored by Pinkard (1981), Paterson (1997), Lacroix (2000), Skempton (2014), Kolman (2016), and Copilaş (2017).

[2] See Kisner (2014) and Stewart (2019) respectively.

[3] In fact, Kornbluh names Hegel as a representative of political formalism (Kornbluh 2019: 130; 189n56).

we may collectively reorganize our political, social, and economic forms of living in the face of ecological crises. I claim that this stems from a theoretical position that frames limits and forms as solely restrictive and necessarily oppressive, a position which ignores how structures save lives. Forms are inherently limiting but therefore potentially liberating.

Since its inception, the environmental movement has included a strong Malthusian current, and Malthusianism is a negative relation to finitude in the context of population growth. In *The Malthusian Moment: Global Population Growth and the Birth of American Environmentalism* (2012), Thomas Robertson argues that the post-WWII period exemplifies the Malthusian strain in large segments of the American environmental movement. "Malthusian concerns," Robertson explains, "gained momentum during the 1950s and took a central place on the public agenda in the late 1960s. During these formative years for the postwar environmental movement—between Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and the first Earth Day in 1970—scores of books, articles, and even movies appeared warning of population growth," the most famous being Paul R. Ehrlich's 1968 book *The Population Bomb* (Robertson 2012: xiii-xiv). Ehrlich's claim is strikingly simple (and simplistic): "The causal chain of deterioration is easily followed to its source. Too many cars, too many factories, too much detergent, too much pesticide, multiplying contrails, inadequate sewage treatment plants, too little water, too much carbon dioxide—all can be traced easily to *too many people*" (Ehrlich 1968: 66-67, quoted in Robertson 2012: 143). In Ehrlich's view, the source of environmental degradation is an excess of people rather than the capitalist dogma of infinite growth.

Garrett Hardin's short but influential article "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968) is another example of this Malthusian current. The eponymous tragedy is that if self-interested individuals possess unlimited access to the commons, the resources held in common will inevitably be destroyed. In the final paragraph of the article, Hardin recommends a strikingly Malthusian solution to the problem: "The only way we can preserve and nurture other and more precious freedoms is by relinquishing the freedom to breed, and that very soon" (Hardin 1968: 1248). The Club of Rome's 1972 report *The Limits to Growth* grew out of this intellectual climate. The report outlines the ecological limits that humanity will face if the dogma of endless economic growth were to be followed without measure. The first point of the report's conclusion states: "If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet

will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity" (Meadows et. al. 1972: 23).

The ecological limit which has gained most attention in recent years concerns global warming. Climate scientists estimate that a global average temperature of 1.5 °C higher than pre-industrial levels will lead to devastating consequences for life on Earth. There is little reason to assume that this limit can realistically be avoided. 1 °C of global warming compared to pre-industrial levels has already been exceeded, yet emissions are not shrinking. The fossil industry's powerful lobbying in the most impactful national economies and the non-committal nature of the climate agreements prevent any real confrontation with one of the fundamental causes of global warming. However, even if an increase of 1.5 °C may not be realistically preventable, there is still a world of difference between 1.5 °C and 6 °C of global warming, which is why responding to anthropogenic climate change is an urgent issue. Regardless of the measures implemented, the results will not be perfect. Permanent damage has already happened as a result of anthropogenic climate change. The ecopolitical task entails limiting this impact.

Contemporary environmental humanities scholars likewise focus on limits to theorize ecological crises. In the past few decades, ecocriticism has become an increasingly more influential field in literary studies and the humanities generally. As a result, there is a wide variety of ecocritical theoretical frameworks, many of which are only vaguely related and often directly opposed in their strategies of reading and political commitments. To summarize all the divergent trends in ecocriticism would be an impossible task in the present context. However, certain trends in ecocriticism leave much to be desired for articulating how we may mitigate the devastating consequences of the crisis. For my purposes, it is worth considering the contrast between my own ecocritical political formalism with one scholar's influence in particular: Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. Latour's framework is implicitly an articulation of limits because it examines the relationship between the whole (networks or assemblies) and its parts (actors or actants). Within ecocriticism and literary studies generally, Latour has been a major influence for social constructivist theories of nature, new materialism, posthumanism, and postcritique, among others. Compared to my adaptation of Hegel and Kornbluh, the biggest contrast with the Latourian legacy concerns the postcritical abandonment of critique and new materialism's flattening of ontology and agency.

First, political formalism's emphasis on projective building must be distinguished from postcritique. In fact, Kornbluh's project is partly a response to postcritique. In short, the postcritical position rejects critique's alleged suspicious attunement towards literary texts. According to postcritics like Rita Felski, such suspicious critics seek to expose hidden meanings embedded within literary and other cultural texts. However, what Kornbluh calls political formalism consists of two primary and inseparable moments: critique and construction. It critiques existing forms not to abolish forms in general but to indicate how future forms must be built differently. Conversely, political formalism insists on building forms not to abandon the project of critique but to demonstrate its politically constructive efficacy. Summarizing the first chapter of Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Latour 2013: 1-23), Felski rhetorically asks: "instead of criticizing institutions, can we also learn to trust them?" (Felski 2016: 218).[4] Abandoning critique in favor of blind trust is a fatal mistake for contemporary theory. Critique's constructive dimension clarifies which institutions are trustworthy, and which should be reformed or abolished. In *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (2018), Andreas Malm offers a forceful critique of Felski's Latourian position: "not only does it seem bad advice to trust the institutions of a society that is rushing headlong into calamity, *it is precisely an excess of such trust that generates denial*, the refusal to acknowledge the science [is] a conspiratorial corollary of a deep-seated allegiance to the status quo" (Malm 2018: 136).[5] Political formalism likewise rejects the suggestion by another Latour-inspired thinker, Graham Harman: "our *primary* attitude towards institutions should be to build and extend them rather than critique or destroy them" (Harman 2014: 31n7).[6] Such an attitude of effacing critique implies that we should endorse, and not abolish, an institution like the fossil economy that destroys the lives and livelihoods of more-than-human life on Earth.

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[4] A similar focus on trust is discernible in Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (2019). See Scott (2022) for a critical account of Brandom and Felski, among others.

[5] Malm's book is a polemical critique of Latourian actor-network theory's counterproductivity for responding to anthropogenic climate change. Such a critique is important because Latour has been influential, as Malm shows, for social constructivist theories of nature, hybridist erasures of distinctions, and new materialist (mis)conceptions of agency.

[6] See Malm (2018: 155).

By contrast, political formalism forges the essential link between critique and construction. It allows us to articulate how our current forms are built and sustained over time, an operation which highlights a given structure's strengths and weaknesses alike. Only through such critical analyses is it possible to collectively decide which forms of social living are worth preserving.

Second, the new materialist redistribution of agency from intentional agents to all things is starkly opposed to a politically formalist conception of freedom. The new materialist gesture is based on a flat ontology which proclaims that there is no essential difference between actants, a "night in which […] all cows are black" (*PS* 10, §16) as Hegel might have put it. In her influential book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett explains that an actant "is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (Bennett 2010: vii). Intentionality or purposive rationality is thus not what characterizes agency, according to new materialists. Rather, *any thing* that can affect any other thing is, by definition, an actant. In Harman's words, "non-human objects are crucial political actors" (Harman 2018: 146). In my view, the major flaw inherent in new materialisms is that they lack a coherent account of freedom and its qualitatively distinct manifestations. In their attempts to decenter the traditional liberal-humanist subject, new materialists—especially their literary-critical followers—tend to erase qualitative distinctions and thereby champion a flat ontology. This implies that categories like nature and society are not only practically intertwined but analytically indistinguishable.

The tendency to eschew the question of freedom is most strikingly articulated by Harman. He revealingly admits that despite local cases where liberation from oppressive regimes may be necessary, he fundamentally does not think "freedom is what we really want. We don't really want to be free human subjects: in fact, we would rather be objects than subjects. We would rather be a particular thing rather than some vague free human subject that can be anything" (Harman 2016: 27-28). Harman's claim that most people do not want to be "some vague free human subject that can be anything" may be correct, but this is not what freedom entails. Harman's comment exemplifies a prevalent but misguided idea that freedom entails endless possibilities. By contrast, Hegel's conception of freedom is truly infinite because it involves a process of self-limiting which thereby affirms the necessity of some internal limits for its actualization. If I were an eternal being with an infinite amount of time at my disposal, I would not be free because there would be no sense of urgency in any of my decisions or

practical commitments, as Martin Hägglund convincingly argues in *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (2019).[7] For political formalists like Hegel, our freedom depends upon political forms and social institutions.

Albeit writing on a different time period, Anahid Nersessian's *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (2015) is analogous to what I aim to provide in this thesis. Both this thesis and her book are politically-oriented ecocritical works trying to articulate the philosophical issue of finitude in relation to literary form. Nersessian's critical remarks on Hegel (Nersessian 2015: 3-4) stem from a conflation of limitlessness with true infinity. Such a conflation is common, yet unfortunate since it bespeaks a widespread refusal to read Hegel's works. If it were the case that Hegel's true infinity used "the language of limitlessness," Nersessian would be correct in observing its "ugly image in neoliberalism's own fantasy of itself as a never-ending cycle of production and consumption" (Nersessian 2015: 4). This, however, is not the case. In spirit, my project is nonetheless consonant with Nersessian's, and I support her view of finitude as constitutive of political freedom: "the ability to receive loss as an ontologically positive entity integral to the material makeup of the world—to any world, including the better world called utopia" (Nersessian 2015: 5). My contention is that the most fecund resources for articulating such a theoretical position may be excavated from the writings of the philosopher that Nersessian (wrongly) suggests is a proponent of limitlessness: Hegel.

The most recent attempt to adapt Hegel for literary theory is offered by Robert Lucas Scott. In his dissertation, *The Spirit and the Letter: Irony, Recollection, Critique* (2022), Scott articulates a Hegelian literary theory of reading. Inspired by Gillian Rose's diagnosis of the neo-Kantian influence on modern sociology in her book *Hegel Contra Sociology* (originally published in 1983), Scott claims that modern literary theory has failed to move beyond the Kantian critical project. Even though many critics deploy Hegelian concepts, Scott argues that literary theory has never been Hegelian, neither in spirit nor to the letter. Instead, proponents of critical literary theory deploy one (or a few) Hegelian concept(s) as a transcendental methodological framework through which they examine a given text's conditions of possibility.

[7] I devote the end of section 1.2 to explore the relevance of Hägglund's book for my project.

In my thesis, I emphasize one specific Hegelian concept, justified by Hegel's own designation of true infinity as "[t]he fundamental concept of philosophy" in his *Encyclopedia Logic* (*EL* §95). I maintain that this is an invaluable concept for literary studies, yet I do not use it to construct a transcendental methodological framework through which I read Spahr's poetry or Ghosh's fiction. On the contrary, my readings are immanent in the Hegelian sense. Reading a literary text immanently means to read it from the inside rather than from the outside. Hence, I provide coherent readings of the most important aspects of the books. I refer to Spahr's and Ghosh's own scholarly works not to anchor my readings on authorial intent but to show how their literary practice is animated by politically formalist concerns in an ecocritical context.

The internal divisions of chapters 2 and 3 aim to cover the main themes and issues in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and *The Hungry Tide* respectively. Political formalism involves both critique and construction. In line with the books themselves, the Spahr chapter foregrounds the critical aspect, whereas the Ghosh chapter leans toward the constructive dimension. In chapter 2, I argue that Spahr's poetry indicates how our status as corporeally vulnerable creatures dependent on others is the basis for political freedom. As finite living beings capable of abstracting from concrete givens, our political forms of collective self-legislation are not pre-given but open to contestation. In chapter 3, I show how Ghosh negotiates the political issue of spatial finitude among more-than-human animals. The novel depicts life in a precarious environment where fishermen are regularly killed by tigers and where most living beings are exposed to potentially lethal cyclones. These limits of nature are not presented as obstacles which may someday be overcome but as internal limits that must be acknowledged by any ecopolitical forms, like the BDT's cyclone shelter. I do not pretend to offer exhaustive readings of these books. What I aim to provide is a coherent account of how they illuminate the coordinates of a potential response to the planetary ecological crisis. Such a response requires reckoning with the nature of our finitude as social beings who are bound to others and therefore may lead meaningful lives of our own.

1 Truly Infinite Forms of Ecopolitics

1.1 Introduction

In his *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel designates the true infinite as "[t]he fundamental concept of philosophy" (*EL* §95). Many recent commentators have paid due attention to the significance of Hegel's concept of true infinity, how it immanently arises out of the logic of finitude, its role in Hegel's system, and its wider implications beyond Hegel's philosophy. My interest in this concept is primarily practically oriented, which means that I will not offer an exhaustive exegetical account of true infinity's emergence from finitude.[8] I claim that Hegel's theorization of true infinity is indispensable for articulating our political freedom in a time of planetary ecological crisis. The issue of finitude animates all discussions concerning freedom, as indicated by the common distinction between negative and positive freedom. My argument is that Hegel's theorization of true infinity allows us to acknowledge that limits are essential for freedom. Drawing on Hegel's argument in the *Science of Logic*, I demonstrate that true infinity is a more constructive relation to finitude than what Hegel calls "bad infinity," which is allergic to finitude. To illustrate the wide-ranging implications of Hegel's theorization of infinity, I point to a variety of examples of true infinity offered by different Hegel scholars. After doing so, I explore Hägglund's theorization of spiritual freedom in *This Life*, which I regard as the most thorough contemporary Hegelian articulation of the relation between freedom and finitude. This discussion leads into the second part of this chapter, where I explore the relation between true infinity and Kornbluh's political formalism. In the final section, I develop a theoretical framework that links true infinity and political formalism in an ecocritical context.

I maintain that articulating the commonality between true infinity and political formalism is indispensable for theorizing a viable contemporary emancipatory ecopolitics while simultaneously attesting to the relevance of literature for such a project. The commonality

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[8] The commentary literature on Hegel's *Science of Logic* is extensive. During my own reading of Hegel's Doctrine of Being, I have benefitted particularly from Stephen Houlgate's (2005; 2022) thorough explications of the logically immanent developments of thought-determinations throughout the first part (the Doctrine of Being) of Hegel's *Logic*. As expected, there is disagreement between Hegel scholars about true infinity, and I unfortunately do not have the space to discuss these divergences in depth.

between true infinity and political formalism constitutes the theoretical framework of this thesis. In short, true infinity is not limitlessness, but rather an affirmation of how finite beings must necessarily relate to their own internal limits to sustain themselves as self-determining free beings. Kornbluh's political formalism similarly asserts that life is not formless but inherently social and therefore formed. The particular social forms which have existed throughout history are not ontologically grounded but open to contestation. Following Kornbluh's lead, I emphasize the crucial role which literature plays in imagining the forms of politics and the politics of form in our current time of crisis. To conclude this chapter, I articulate the relevance of the conjunction of true infinity and political formalism for an ecopolitics that insists on limits not as unsurpassable barriers but as constitutive of our truly infinite freedom as finite creatures living on Earth.

1.2 What Is True Infinity?

As mentioned in the introduction, true infinity is a potentially misleading concept. I will therefore clarify my own understanding of the concept and explain its relevance for my thesis. True infinity is the response to what Hegel calls the "sorrow of finitude" (*SL* 102). This sorrow is a result of the truth of finite beings, that "the hour of their birth is the hour of their death" (*SL* 101) because mortality is the constitutive and ineradicable limit of finite beings. The sorrow of finitude is intimately related to what Hegel calls the "unhappy consciousness" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This shape of consciousness is characterized by a feeling of being separated from the infinite. In Hegel's words, the unhappy consciousness is "the movement of an infinite *yearning*" which is infinite by virtue of its essence being "the unattainable *Beyond* which flees as we grasp at it, or rather has already fled" (*PS* 89, §217). Most Hegel commentators agree that the historical reference for the unhappy consciousness is Augustine or medieval Christianity in general. In a theological context, the unhappy consciousness experiences itself as divided and separated from God, which has been transposed into an "unattainable *Beyond*" (*PS* 89, §217). This finite life is consequently viewed as merely a transitory stage, which will eventually be consummated in an eternal afterlife in communion with God. For Hegel, by contrast, God's manifestation and subsequent crucifixion as Christ signals the death of the transcendent God of the beyond leading to the birth of the Holy Spirit

as the community of believers. The actualization of freedom is thus, for Hegel, not a transhistorical gift from a limitless authority but a historical achievement that must be continually renegotiated by finite beings within collective forms.

What Hegel calls the bad infinite is characterized by being allergic to finitude. The bad infinite is separate from, and opposed to, the finite. Consequently, "[t]here are *two* worlds, one infinite and one finite, and in their connection the infinite is only the *limit* of the finite and thus only a determinate, *itself finite infinite*" (*SL* 111). Such a radical separation between finite and infinite, or between a realm of necessity and a realm of freedom, is unintelligible. For Hegel, the finite and the infinite are not two separate spheres, but rather two sides of the same coin. These sides are inseparable in practice but nonetheless analytically distinct. True infinity is this speculative unity of the finite and the infinite.[9] Hegel uses two geometrical figures to illustrate the difference between these two forms of infinity: a straight line which keeps on going to infinity and therefore never reaches its destination, in contrast to true infinity, which is geometrically represented by "the *circle*, the line that has reached itself, closed and wholly present, without *beginning* and *end*" (*SL* 119). The circle is truly infinite because it includes an internal limit, like its radius, but is infinite by virtue of having no beginning or end. However, the image of a circle is misleading to the extent that it implies self-enclosure and completeness with no room for externality. To illustrate that true infinity is not allergic to otherness, I will draw on some examples of true infinity offered by a range of Hegel scholars.

True infinity may seem like a foreign concept, yet examples of it are commonplace. Andrew Davis argues that true infinity is self-relation, and that every act which accomplishes such self-relating can be considered truly infinite. According to Davis, "I am infinite as a potentially limited being that overcomes limitation and relates to itself by means of infinite (circular) activities" and he gives the following non-exhaustive list of truly infinite activities: "digestion, respiration, circulation, growth, decay, sensation, appreciation, imagination, and,

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[9] In Hegel's words: "Here we have, in a graphic example, the nature of speculative thought displayed in its determining feature: it consists solely in grasping the opposed moments in their unity. Inasmuch as each moment shows, as a matter of fact, that it has its opposite in it, and that in this opposite it rejoins itself, the affirmative truth is this internally self-moving unity, the grasping together of both thoughts, their infinity – the reference to oneself which is not immediate but infinite" (*SL* 122).

most crucially, thinking" (Davis 183). These activities are examples of true infinity because they are activities in which I interact with externality yet continually return to myself and thereby sustain myself through this reflexive activity. To build on Davis's point, one may turn to Hegel's example of eating apples from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, an activity in which "I destroy [the apple's] organic self-identity and assimilate it to myself" (*LPR3* 127). Such an activity implies, first, that the apple's internal constitution includes the possibility of being destroyed. Second, it implies that the apple is constitutively homogeneous "with my digestive organs such that I can make it homogenous with myself" and consume it (*LPR3* 127). Hegel uses this example to illustrate an aspect of every organic object, but in the present context I would add that Hegel's example likewise indicates how the first "infinite (circular) activit[y]" that Davis lists, digestion, is infinite. Digestion is a truly infinite process of encountering the world, and through that encounter—eating the apple—I am not alienated from my own self-identity but become and sustain myself only through encountering the world and returning to myself in the circular process of digestion.

Related to Davis's focus on biological processes, Slavoj Žižek (2012) explains how true infinity resembles contemporary theoretical biology's articulation of life as autopoietic (self-creating). In fact, he claims that Hegel is "the ultimate thinker of autopoiesis" because true infinity reveals "the process of the emergence of necessary features out of chaotic contingency" (Žižek 2012: 467). To indicate why true infinity resembles autopoiesis, Žižek quotes biologist Francisco Varela, who explains that autopoiesis designates how life emerges as a result of a looped process whereby "a self-organizing network of biochemical reactions produces molecules, which do something specific and unique: they create a boundary, a membrane, which constrains the network that has produced the constituents of the membrane" (Varela 1996: 212, quoted in Žižek 2012: 157-158). Because true infinity designates not limitlessness but "active self-limitation," Žižek explains, "life (even at its most elementary, as a living cell) is the basic form of true infinity, since it already involves the minimal loop through which a process is no longer simply determined by the Outside of its environs [...]. Infinity acquires its first actual existence the moment a cell's membrane starts to function as a self-boundary" (Žižek 2012: 158). The circular process of self-limitation is not only necessary for life; it *is* life.

Another example of true infinity is love. Stephen Houlgate argues that love "is the incarnation of true infinity [...] because it is a relation to another person in which one's identity

is not simply limited by that other but in which one finds or 'unites with' oneself in the other" (Houlgate 2005: 431). Put differently, love is not a scarce resource one distributes to a given number of other finite beings, emptying oneself of love in the process. On the contrary, by loving another, I sustain myself by relating to the other, but without erasing the otherness of either the beloved or myself. Such a reading of Hegel can be confirmed with reference to a passage from an early fragment on "Love," where Hegel describes love as follows: "It is a mutual giving and taking [...]. The lover who takes is not thereby made richer than the other; he is enriched indeed, but only so much as the other is. So too the giver does not make himself poorer; by giving to the other he has at the same time and to the same extent enhanced his own treasure" (*ETW*: 307).[10] Emphasizing the constructive way of relating to finitude, Hegel likewise uses friendship and love as examples of freedom in the *Philosophy of Right*. He explains that in these relations "we are not inherently one-sided; we restrict ourselves gladly in relating ourselves to another, but in this restriction know ourselves as ourselves. In this determinacy a human being should not feel determined; on the contrary, by treating the other as other he first arrives at the feeling of his own selfhood" (*PR* 33).

Houlgate further argues that political forms like the state embody true infinity. Being a member, and not a mechanical part, of a political form like the state constitutes true infinity because the members "do not actually have to die to join together in this way, but they do have to give up, or 'negate,' the autonomy and independence on which they otherwise insist" (Houlgate 2005: 428). Even if particular relationships or historical incarnations of the state form have broken down in the past and will do so in the future, this is not, Houlgate notes, a reason for denying their truly infinite quality: "They exhibit the quality of infinity [...] insofar as they are unified, self-relating wholes—and, indeed processes—that are nothing beyond their constitutive moments. If the state or the family sets itself against its members, of course—as it often can—it becomes a *bad* infinity" (Houlgate 2005: 428).

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[10] Immediately following this passage, Hegel quotes *Romeo and Juliet*, but Hegel curiously enough excludes the final words proclaiming the infinity of both Juliet's bounty and love: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, *for both are infinite*" (Shakespeare 2008: 215, 2.2.176-178, emphasis added).

Like Houlgate, Todd McGowan uses the state as an example of true infinity, but his argument differs. McGowan contrasts the state form's universality embodying true infinity with the bad infinity animating capitalism. The latter promises endless economic growth, whereas the former acknowledges an inherent limit and thus exemplifies true infinity. In McGowan's words, "[w]hereas the bad infinite characterizes capitalism's ceaseless striving for more, the true infinite is the structure of the state's universality. It constitutes itself through positing its own limit and exists through that limit rather than through the attempt constantly to go beyond it" (McGowan 2021: 236). Hence, the state embodies true infinity since its very reason for being consists in regulation. Elsewhere, McGowan explains that whereas the bad infinite "has no limit" and the finite "has an external limit that it can never surpass," the true infinite, by contrast, "limits itself, like the subject that confines itself to a single project out of a multitude of possibilities" (McGowan 2016: 137). This is true both for the state as a political form but equally for an individual "subject that confines itself to a single project" instead of drowning in the endless possibilities being offered by so-called "freedom of choice."

Reading and writing can also be examples of true infinity insofar as these activities involve self-relating through otherness and are thereby activities in which I can actualize my freedom as a finite being. As with all the other above-mentioned examples of true infinity, not every act of reading or writing would be truly infinite. For instance, if I treat a book as doing no more than espousing a view with which I already agree, I have not encountered otherness at all, but only recognized part of myself in the book. Insofar as literature may expose me to experiences and perspectives which are different from my own, I have the capacity to acknowledge this difference and be changed by the reading experience, but without becoming alienated from myself. Rather than being alienated from a preexisting identity, the reading experience is co-constitutive of my own understanding of who I am and what I value. Similarly, if I reduce a literary work to being entirely determined by social factors, I thereby render the work wholly finite without excesses or ruptures. Clearly all literary works are partly a result of material, socio-economic, and historical factors, but to erase the excess of literature would be a great disservice to literature as an act of creation made possible by our truly infinite freedom.

Because I interpret Hegel's true infinity as a theory of political freedom via Kornbluh's political formalism, I will consider the most sophisticated contemporary Hegelian account of finitude and freedom, which is offered by Hägglund in *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual*

Freedom (2019). I discuss Hägglund at length because he gives a sustained account of how finitude is the condition of possibility for spiritual freedom, which can only be actualized within social forms. Before giving an account of Hägglund's theorization of spiritual freedom based on temporal finitude, I should note that Hägglund never uses the term true infinity in his book. This is unfortunate since Hegel's true infinity is consistent with Hägglund's account.

The basis for Hägglund's argument is the ineradicable fact of mortality: finite beings will inevitably die, and may die at any given moment, a point which recalls Hegel's poignant phrase concerning the destiny of finite beings, whereby "the hour of their birth is the hour of their death" (*SL* 101). For Hägglund, temporal finitude is the basis for any distinctions of value: "The indefinite time of my death is both what gives me the chance to prolong my life—to live on—and what makes it urgent to decide what I should do with my life" (Hägglund 2019: 200). The question of value could never, by contrast, arise for an eternal being. Hägglund explains that pursuing a concrete project would leave the eternity of time intact in such a scenario. If my lifetime were endless, "I would not even be able to understand what it means to do something sooner rather than later in my life, since I would have no sense of a finite lifetime that gives urgency to any project or activity" (Hägglund 2019: 5). Even if eternal life were possible, Hägglund argues that such a state would not be desirable because the ineradicable precondition for value, temporal finitude, would be lacking.[11] Being committed to the finitude inherent to the life of a mortal being is the basis of what Hägglund calls "secular faith," which "is to be devoted to a life that will end, to be dedicated to projects that can fail or break down" (Hägglund 2019: 5-6). The difference between secular and religious faith is, according to Hägglund, precisely their positions relative to the question of temporal finitude.[12]

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[11] Cf. Houlgate (2022: 406n34), who explains that "eternal life" is not timelessness, according to Hegel: "This sense of being unbounded, free and truly infinite, Hegel believes, is what Christianity understands by 'eternal life'. Eternal life is thus not a life that goes on forever, but one that exhibits the *quality* of true infinity. Furthermore, this quality of being and life can be enjoyed only by beings who are finite. Eternal life thus not to be found after death in some timeless beyond, but it is exhibited in the here and now by beings that are in the process of *ceasing to be*. Only beings born to die can have eternal life."

[12] Hägglund crucially clarifies that he uses the terms "religious" and "secular" not to describe the explicit beliefs which people claim to hold on a theoretical level about theological issues such as the existence

The condition of temporal finitude and being committed to *this life*, and not some imagined otherworldly beyond, is the basis for freedom. For Hägglund, all living beings are free as self-determining. Unlike new materialists, however, he distinguishes between natural and spiritual freedom. Borrowing Hägglund's own example, a natural being like a seagull is free in the sense that when the seagull dives down to the water and determines whether to pick up a fish, the seagull's action "is not simply a response to stimuli but a response to stimuli in terms of what counts *as* food for the seagull" (Hägglund 2019: 174). Being able to determine a part of the environment as meaningful to a given end for a natural being is an aspect of what Hägglund calls natural freedom.[13] In this sense, humans are natural beings. Natural freedom is not the end of the story, however: "Natural freedom provides a freedom of self-movement, but only in light of imperatives that are treated as given and ends that cannot be called into question by the agent itself" (Hägglund 2019: 175). Spiritual beings are neither unnatural nor do they enjoy or suffer eternal life. To be spiritually free, one must also be a natural being. More specifically "*spiritual freedom* requires the ability to ask which imperatives to follow in light of our ends, as well as the ability to call into question, challenge, and transform our ends themselves" (Hägglund 2019: 175). This argument is not an empirical observation about the realities of freedom at this moment in history but a philosophical clarification of the conditions for spiritual freedom. Hägglund does not claim that spiritual freedom is necessarily unique to human beings: "It is possible that we may discover other species that are spiritually free or that we may create artificial forms of life that are capable of spiritual freedom. That is an empirical question, which I do not seek to answer. My aim is not to decide which species are spiritually free, but *to clarify the conditions of spiritual freedom*" (Hägglund 2019: 177-178).

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of God or an eternal afterlife. On the contrary, he uses these terms to describe the positions regarding temporal finitude that are implicit in people's practical engagements throughout their lives.

[13] Hägglund argues that animals operate by following norms. He thereby rejects the prevalent view that animals are entirely determined by their natural instincts. Rather than their actions being "hardwired by their natural instincts," Hägglund explains, "an instinct is already expressive of a norm, since it specifies something that the animal *ought* to do and that it can *fail* to do." More significantly, "many animals can be socialized into forms of behavior that are not hardwired by their natural instincts," like cats "behav[ing] like dogs because they have been raised by them" (Hägglund 2019: 175).

Hägglund's embrace of mortality as the ineradicable condition for freedom resembles the internal limit of true infinity. Hägglund's articulation of freedom resonates with Hegel's insofar as both see finitude as a positive condition of possibility rather than as a negative restriction to be mourned or transgressed. Moreover, Hägglund states that freedom is a matter of self-relation,[14] which likewise is the core of being truly infinite. What Hägglund designates as spiritual freedom, "the ability to call into question, challenge, and transform our ends themselves" (Hägglund 2019: 175), is a truly infinite activity. In his *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel explains that the main activity through which humans enact their own freedom is thinking. In activities common to all natural beings, like perceiving, feeling, and willing (Hegel's examples), "I am never completely at home with myself. Thinking alone is the sphere where everything foreign has vanished and the spirit is absolutely free, at home with itself. To achieve this aim is the interest of the Idea, of thinking, and of philosophy" (*ILHP* 80). To understand why thinking is the highest form of freedom for Hegel, Hägglund's distinction between natural and spiritual freedom is helpful. In Hägglund's terms, what Hegel calls "thinking" in this passage amounts to rational accountability, which is the capacity of spiritual beings to question their own norms and articulate accounts for their own actions and commitments. This is a fundamentally political act, insofar as norms are inherently social and animate the concrete forms of social organization which a given group of people follow. The political nature of thinking leads into Kornbluh's theorization of political formalism.

1.3 Political Forms as Truly Infinite

In *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (2019), Kornbluh articulates a form of politics that does not aim at dismantling all forms and structures, but which instead insists on the inescapability of form for life. In her introduction, Kornbluh critiques what she calls "anarcho-vitalism," exemplified by Giorgio Agamben. Anarcho-vitalism, according to Kornbluh, asserts that "freedom means nothing more than destituent play, deforming and

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[14] "To be alive is necessarily to have a self-relation, and any self-relation consists in the *activity* of self-maintenance" (Hägglund 2019: 181).

unforming, ceaseless tearing down" (Kornbluh 2019: 2). Directly opposed to this tendency of viewing the demolition of all forms as the sole goal of emancipatory politics, Kornbluh introduces the term "political formalism" to foreground that life is dependent on forms to thrive. Put differently, "political formalism [is] an alternative affirmation of form" which "advocate[s] for the strategic value of provisional limits, for the constant deliberation of form with special help from the mediating faculty of aesthetics, and for a certain ontological facticity of social form: our collective interdependence requires a shape" (Kornbluh 2019: 81).

The Order of Forms traces the co-emergence of mathematical formalism, Marxist materialism, and literary realism in the mid-19th century. What unites these three seemingly disparate discourses is that "math, Marxism, and the novel in the nineteenth century [share] an extraordinary promotion of form as the construction of possible relations," a commonality which "can and should inspire a more constructive theoretical criticism in the twenty-first" (Kornbluh 2019: 7). For my purposes, the most crucial aspect is Kornbluh's overall project of political formalism, and what implications this framework has for literary studies in general and for ecocriticism in particular. Hence, I do not draw on Kornbluh's specific readings of math, Marxism, or 19th-century realism, but still follow the general principles of political formalism. Unlike Kornbluh, I do not write on 19th century realist novels in this thesis. Yet I argue that her politically formalist framework of reading literature can be adapted to contemporary ecopoetry and ecofiction. I return to this issue in chapters 2-4.

Political formalism is a "formalism of the political that affirms order's essence while foregrounding its madeness" (Kornbluh 2019: 71). Only through a formal examination of existing forms can we discern the contingency of particular forms but equally the necessity of some formal configuration. Concerning Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, for instance, Kornbluh argues that Dickens's "novel underscores the infinite project of installing limits, the unfinished business and ungroundable schemes of delimiting social space" and that "the novel doesn't offer a facile endorsement of just any limit—it is, rather, keen to differentiate good limits from bad, general limits from particular" (Kornbluh 2019: 92). Political formalism differs from anarcho-vitalism in the political conclusions to be drawn from critiques of existing forms. According to Kornbluh, anarcho-vitalism presents the oppressive and authoritarian aspects of particular social forms, like the nation-state, as an indictment of forms in general. Political formalism draws a different conclusion because it embodies "the struggle to infrastructuralize

flourishing above immiseration, the struggle to contrive spaces adequate for human beings even as we recognize the ungroundedness of every space" (Kornbluh 2019: 5-6).

Like all living beings, humans require some form of metabolic interaction with nature, yet the form of that interaction is not predetermined. Some biochemical processes are necessary to sustain organic life, but the form of human metabolism is uniquely underdetermined. This is why human animals can establish different modes of production, unlike other forms of life. In Søren Mau's words, human metabolism is "a unity of necessity and contingency: a metabolism *has* to be established, but its social form is never simply given" (Mau 2023: 321). This is the precise argument Kornbluh makes about social forms. The link between true infinity and political formalism in an environmental context is indicated by Mau's summary of how human metabolism is unique: "Far from being the sign of an inherent finitude of the human being, the loss of immediacy at the centre of its being is rather a sign of its *infinity* in the sense that it enables humans to socially mediate their relation to the rest of nature in an infinite number of ways" (Mau 2023: 103). This is a fundamental politically formalist insight.

Before turning to Kornbluh's theory of literary realism, it is worth noting that Georg Lukács observed a possible connection between true infinity and literary form more than a century ago. In his *Theory of the Novel* (1916), Lukács notes that the modern novel lacks the organic coherence that the ancient epic possessed. Because of "the discrete, unlimited nature of the material of the novel," the form "has a 'bad' infinity about it." Consequently, "it needs certain imposed limits in order to become form" (Lukács 1971: 81). According to Lukács, the modern novel overcomes this predicament "by recourse to the biographical form." By focusing on a central character, "the scope of the world is limited" and the rest of the novel's material is unified by the relations "to the central character and the problem symbolised by the story of his life" (Lukács 1971: 81). For my purposes, it does not matter whether Lukács's historical claim about the difference between the ancient epic and the modern novel is correct. His observation is nonetheless significant because it indicates a possible relation between true infinity and literary form. In general terms, Lukács's point is relevant because it highlights limits as productive for modeling literary worlds. Moreover, the argument that biographical form structures the narrative world of the novel has implications for theorizing narrative perspective and focalization. For instance, the focalization that Ghosh employs in *The Hungry Tide* serves as a productive limit for modeling the world of the Sundarbans for his global readership.

Turning to Kornbluh's argument about literary form, she theorizes realism not as a faithful rendering of a pre-given world but as a formal modeling of possible worlds. Put differently, "realism fundamentally designs and erects socialities, imagines the grounds of collectivities, probes the mystique of materialities, modulates institutions and productions beyond the scope of the given" (Kornbluh 2019: 16). Kornbluh explicitly critiques the dominant view of "[literary] realism as the most referential, least literary of possible objects," a position which maintains "that literature is information" and hence an utterly formless procedure of faithfully rendering a lost presence (Kornbluh 2019: 44).[15] By contrast, Kornbluh argues that literary realism is formalist because it "encompasses not *the* world but *a* world, drafting a structuration of social space that does not reify the extant order of things" (Kornbluh 2019: 54). This is in line with a passage by Karl Marx, one of the primary exemplars of political formalism: "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally" (Marx 1982: 284).[16] Hence, the possibility of abstracting from concrete givens is a precondition for artistic creations like realist novels. A politically formalist reading of a literary text thus maps how the formal elements of the text are composed in integral connection.

Although Kornbluh focuses on the 19th century realist novel, I maintain that her intervention has broader implications, even though political formalism could only have arisen in the mid-19th century, according to Kornbluh. My argument is that the literary works I examine in chapters 2 and 3, Juliana Spahr's book of poetry *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*, affirm the politically formalist truth that forms are necessary for life and that freedom can only be attained within social collectives. Briefly, Spahr's ecopoetry is an attempt not to simply represent already-existing collectives, but to envision how to make space for new ones, thereby foregrounding the etymological root of ecopoetry in the conjunction of *oikos* and *poiesis*. Meanwhile, through an indirect meditation

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[15] Cf. Stephen Greenblatt's "desire to speak with the dead" (quoted in Kornbluh 2019: 44).

[16] Kornbluh cites this passage in her earlier book *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (Kornbluh 2014: 27-28) but not in *The Order of Forms*, curiously enough.

on a range of literary forms, Ghosh's realist novel affirms what is unique to literature and human sociality in general: that particular forms may be transitory and wither away, but that we must nonetheless build anew to sustain the livelihoods of more-than-human life.

1.4 The Forms of Truly Infinite Ecopolitics

Capitalism as an economic system is based on the promise of endless growth and transgression of any externally posited barriers, including planetary boundaries. This is why contemporary techno-capitalists like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk see the limits of planet Earth not as a constitutive limit of society or as an ultimate obstacle but as a springboard for humanity's supposedly inevitable project of space colonization. Before outlining the relevance of Hegel for contemporary ecopolitics, I briefly outline Kelly Oliver's non-Hegelian ecocritical approach, elements of which I incorporate in my reading of Spahr's ecopoetry (see section 2.5). In her book *Earth and World: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions* (2015), Oliver examines how our relationship to the Earth and its inhabitants radically changes as a result of seeing Earth from space, exemplified by the question around which her book is organized: "How can we share the earth with those whom we do not even share a world?" (Oliver 4). Because we can recognize the constitutive limits of our relations with others, "earth ethics" arises out of the realization that "embracing our own limitations allows us to acknowledge our dependence on others, and on the social bonds, that enable belonging to both earth and world" (Oliver 41). Oliver's project is adjacent to aspects of Hegel's logic of (in)finitude. Though earth and world are the categories deployed in Oliver's book title, they could be substituted by ground and horizon, or finite and infinite respectively, insofar as the Earth is finite whereas every world is infinite. For Oliver, the Earth as our unhomely planetary home is the ineradicable finite ground for the infinitely varied worlds that each of us constitutes together with others.

Oliver examines the tension between finitude and infinitude, which she frames as a tension between politics and ethics. Whereas "[p]olitics requires rules and laws that apply to everyone," ethics, by contrast, "is always in excess of rules and laws because it requires a decision beyond mere rule following. Politics must be calculable and generalizable; ethics must be incalculable and singular. Our responsibility lies in this strife between politics and ethics or what we could call the strife between world and earth" (Oliver 223). Hence, the tension between

politics and ethics is, for Oliver, a tension between the finite and the infinite. She articulates this tension by connecting the two domains of politics and ethics via a conception of the Earth as the singular home common to all its inhabitants. The Earth is unique and irreplaceable but simultaneously home to an infinite variety of worlds and forms of sociality. It is thus the ineradicable basis for every truly infinite self-relation exhibited by living beings.

Following Oliver, a reconceptualization of our relation to the Earth requires a rejection of the view that the Earth's finitude is a tragic fact to be mourned and that the only solution to the planetary ecological crisis is space colonization. Instead, we can see the ineradicable limits of the Earth as beginnings rather than endings. Writing on "the nobility of sight" in the philosophical tradition, Hans Jonas argues that the perceptual origin of the idea of infinity lies in the visual horizon. Due to the Earth's spherical shape, visual depth necessarily includes an ever-receding and indefinite horizon: "Sight includes at any given instant an *infinite* manifold at once, and its own qualitative conditions open the way into what lies beyond. The unfolding of space before the eye, under the magic of light, bears in itself the germ of infinity—as a perceptual aspect" (Jonas 2001: 151). The potential infinity embodied in the always-receding horizon is, however, a disavowal of the limited surface of the Earth. The idea of an unlimited horizon for expansion has historically served as the justification for the conviction that endless economic growth is both possible and desirable. It has likewise served as the basis for the idea of the frontier so crucial to the American westward expansion in the first half of the 19th century. The very idea of a frontier is precisely an external limit to be overcome. With the onset of ecological crisis on a planetary scale, the frontier has shifted to the promise of space colonization. In this vein, Jonas makes a revealing comment immediately following the above-cited passage: "The fact that we can look into the unbounded depth of the universe has surely been of immense importance in the formation of our ideas" (Jonas 2001: 151). Jonas's book was published in 1966, only two years prior to the first extraterrestrial image of Earth, *Earthrise*, was broadcast around the globe. Like how our ability to perceive the apparent limitlessness of outer space has had "immense importance in the formation of our ideas," Oliver argues that our technological capacity to see Earth from outer space necessarily alters how we think about our relation to this planet and the foundations of ethics and politics.

Before offering my own theorization of Hegel's relevance in a time of planetary ecological crisis, it is worth briefly considering the most recent attempt to articulate Hegel's

relevance for the Anthropocene, offered by Sigurd Hverven. Published in Norwegian, his book *Wild Values: Philosophy of Nature in the Anthropocene* (2023) focuses on a different aspect of Hegel's philosophy than my thesis does. Hverven adapts Hegel's theory of recognition to articulate an asymmetrical theory of acknowledging non-human nature. One Hegelian concept employed by Hverven is nonetheless relevant for my discussion of true infinity: immanent teleology (Hverven 2023: 284-285). Hverven adopts this concept from Jonas, but it is consistent with Hegel's philosophy of life. For Hegel, a life is truly infinite. This does not mean that a living being's lifetime is endless. It means that a living being's relation to itself requires a reckoning with the finitude of its own finite lifetime. Hegel is often accused of being a teleological thinker, especially regarding history. However, if there is a teleology in Hegel, it is immanent rather than transcendent. This can be explained with reference to his conception of life, explored by Hägglund, among others. If Hegel were a thinker of transcendent teleology, he would argue that the goal for a living being would be to die. As a thinker of immanent teleology, however, Hegel regards the goal of life as sustaining oneself through relational activities. The goal of life is therefore not finally consummated at death but must be continually fulfilled during every moment of our lives. Through such acts of relating through otherness, finite beings enact their freedom.[17]

For the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Hegel's conception of true infinity provides valuable resources for articulating a response to the problems surfacing during our time of crisis. A Hegelian articulation of such a response would not entail positing new external barriers to capitalism's drive for endless accumulation and growth. We must instead reconceive our relation to nature not as a barrier to be overcome but as the constitutive limit of the social order. True infinity allows us to articulate this relation. Todd McGowan (2016) has already outlined the contours of a Hegelian response to the ecological crisis.[18] Recalling a passage I cited in section 1.2, McGowan explains that, unlike the bad infinite, the true infinite "limits

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[17] Cf. Hverven: "Organisms have their own *telos* – purpose – which is never reached once and for all like a static destination (in that case, the purpose of life would be death). The *telos* of an organism, on the contrary, consists in sustaining the contingent process which must be continually realized anew, with an ever-present possibility of failure" (Hverven 2023: 285, my translation).

[18] In fact, reading McGowan's book chapter was the original inspiration for my thesis.

itself, like the subject that confines itself to a single project out of a multitude of possibilities" (McGowan 2016: 137). Because capitalism operates according to the promise of endless accumulation and follows the logic of the bad infinite, it always tries to transcend limitations, like planetary boundaries.[19] This is why contemporary techno-capitalists like Bezos and Musk (and their followers) are enthralled by the idea of space colonization, a point which McGowan also makes but without reference to these exemplary figures (McGowan 2016: 137-138). The most common response from contemporary environmentalists to the promise of infinite growth is an absolute insistence on external limits and finitude, such as planetary boundaries and the scarcity of natural resources available for future capitalist extraction and production. McGowan summarily explains that "[t]he natural world, according to [Rachel] Carson and many other ecological activists following in her wake, will resist our attempts to domesticate it, whether through the poisoning of necessary resources or the warming of the planet" (McGowan 2016: 147). Environmental activists correctly criticize capitalism's infinite yearning for more, but positing external barriers to capitalist growth does not alleviate the problem.

This is where Hegel's concept of true infinity becomes relevant. As McGowan succinctly puts it, "[a] self-limiting system, precisely what Hegel theorizes with his concept of the true infinite, is the only tenable alternative to capitalism. It doesn't pose an arbitrary limit that the capitalist system can quickly subsume but clings to the limit as constitutive of the system itself" (McGowan 2016: 140). Such a limit cannot be abolished. If it were abolished, capitalism could no longer exist. Instead of positing new external barriers for capitalism's logic of infinite growth to transcend, we must rearticulate society's own internal and constitutive limit, and it is just as crucial to "rethink the form that the limit takes" (McGowan 2016: 150). A society based on true infinity "would be a society that embraced its obstacle as its very condition of possibility" (McGowan 2016: 156) rather than the endless overcoming of finite external limits animating capitalist growth. To elucidate the stakes of this reconceptualization,

[19] Capital, in Malm's words, "can drain nature on biophysical resources without really noticing what is in there, its eyes firmly fixed higher. Planetary boundaries do not appear to be on the radar. Capital qualitatively ignores nature while quantitatively overtaxing it" (Malm 2016: 288).

it is worth quoting a passage from McGowan's *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets*:

> An ecological alternative to capitalism must elude the Scylla of finitude and the Charybdis of the bad infinite, the Scylla of Rachel Carson and the Charybdis of Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger. Doing so requires reconceiving nature not as an external limit to capitalism nor as a site of infinite possibility but as the internal limit of human society. The social order requires the natural world in order to function, but the unpredictability of this world constantly throws off social progress. Whether it's an earthquake in Lisbon, the eruption of Mt. Krakatoa, or widespread death of honeybees, nature has the capacity at any time to throw social productivity out of joint. But this limit—this unpredictability and violence of the natural world—can become an internal limit of the social order, the basis for a true infinite. By starting with this unpredictability as the limit, social production would orient itself around addressing this limit without any possibility of ever transcending it. (McGowan 2016: 148)

Reorienting our political forms, social institutions, and economic modes of production around such an internal limit requires rejecting the capitalist fantasy of endless progress. The point is not to amend or abolish nature but to reconceive our relation to it—not as an externality to be overcome but as the internal limit for any social order at all. Some forms of natural disasters have occurred throughout all recorded human history, and they will likely happen in the foreseeable future. This is not simply a reason to mourn some ahistorical tragedy of existence. Instead, acknowledging such a limit should inform our concrete forms of social organization which can mitigate the worst consequences of such disasters. It would likewise require a reevaluation of institutions that have produced the crisis, like the fossil economy.

Although certain principles may be drawn from Hegel's philosophy which could inform how we might organize society today, Hegel's fundamental point is not to present a model of a perfect society. He infamously writes in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that "[t]o comprehend *what is*, this is the task of philosophy, because *what is*, is reason. Whatever happens, every individual is a *child of his time*; so philosophy too is *its own time apprehended in thoughts*" (*PR* 15). When Hegel writes that "[*w]hat is rational is actual and what is actual is rational* (*PR* 14) and that "*what is*, is reason," he does not mean that the time in which he lived was the crowning achievement of human civilization or the end of history as a countless number of accusations would have it. Hegel's point is that reality can be comprehended by means of reason. This is the task of philosophy for Hegel, neither more nor less. At the

beginning of the paragraph ending with the infamous “owl of Minerva [which] begins its flight only with the falling of dusk,” Hegel writes “[o]ne more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it” (*PR* 16). That philosophy cannot give instructions on “what the world ought to be” does not mean that philosophy is simply an affirmation of the status quo. Philosophy’s radical potential lies in its act of interpreting and apprehending its own time in thought, and I would add that literature can fulfil a related yet different role. McGowan argues that philosophy’s political intervention is to provide “a radical interpretation of political forms. Although philosophy cannot issue instructions or provide an outline for a political project, its recognizing power is at once a transformative power. To turn Marx on his head, it is by interpreting the world that the philosopher changes the world” (McGowan 2021: 235). Following Kornbluh, I maintain that literature’s radical potential lies in its formal modeling of possible worlds. This allows us to perceive the constructedness of past and present forms to build more just forms in the future. Literature therefore supplements philosophy in the radical project of emancipatory ecopolitics.

Hegel’s concept of true infinity nonetheless indicates that contemporary ecopolitics must acknowledge political formalism’s fundamental truth, that forms of sociality are necessary for life. The ecological crises and catastrophes pervading our contemporary moment cannot be resolved within a system feasting on the promise of infinite growth and endless accumulation. It may sound wonderful that techno-capitalists want to save humanity by abandoning the Earth to colonize and terraform other planets. At best, however, such an adventure would merely defer, rather than confront, the fundamental problem. This endless deferral is inherent to the logic of capital and bad infinity. To apprehend our own time in thought means to examine what a proper ecopolitical response may be. I maintain that such a response is not to invest our hopes in the techno-capitalist promise of space colonization. The history of terrestrial colonization indicates that simply transporting existing social relations and economic modes of production to a different place does not magically resolve the contradictions of capitalism. A truly infinite form of ecopolitics insists on the necessity of physically and socially rebuilding our forms and structures. A politically formalist project of rebuilding need not entail a one-to-one reconstruction. It almost never is. Such projects require concrete analyses of different formal configurations to decide which forms would be most adequate for social life.

2 Juliana Spahr's Politically Formalist Ecopoetry

2.1 Introduction

Juliana Spahr wrote the dated sections of *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* in the period between 9/11 and the end of March 2003, when the U.S. initiated its invasion of Iraq. The book is a work of prose poetry, stylized as a diary, where Spahr meditates on the intimate relations between the personal, political, and ecological issues she experiences as an American at the start of the 21st century. This chapter argues that the book is an exemplary work of politically formalist ecopoetry. I begin by providing an outline of Spahr's own conception of the relation between poetry and politics, based on numerous interviews and critical writings. I call attention to Spahr's scholarly texts not to secure my reading of *TCEL* via authorial intent but to articulate how they show her politically formalist practice, both as a poet and scholar.

My reading of *TCEL* follows a fourfold division. First, by highlighting bodily intimacy, connections, and separations, Spahr explores both our finitude and infinitude as living beings. We are corporeally distinct and separated from each other, and this is the basis for interpersonal relations and political structures. As finite beings, we are necessarily separate from each other, yet we are also truly infinite insofar as we are structurally dependent on others to survive and thrive. Our corporeal finitude is thus the basis for true infinity understood as self-relation since the actualization of freedom requires relations with others. Second, Spahr's evocation of love functions as an embodiment of true infinity. As finite beings, we can only love a limited number of other finite creatures, yet this limitation is the precondition for any truly infinite forms of love. Spahr explores the increasingly porous border between the private and public spheres by relating how the time spent with her beloveds is infused with knowledge of all the horrors being committed in the names of ordinary American citizens like themselves. In the third section, I subsequently turn to Spahr's meditations on technological globalization, exemplified by news media and the Internet. These mediating forms can foster connections with faraway others but may simultaneously inhibit effective political struggle. This is exemplified by the rumors, unmentioned in the news, about the preparations for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In the final section of this chapter, I argue that Spahr's evocation of the desire to escape our conflict-ridden planet embodies the lure of the bad infinite. Rather than interminably wallowing in the sorrow of finitude, Spahr insists on the need for political struggle, exemplified by the worldwide

political protests opposing the coming invasion of Iraq. The protests proved unsuccessful because the invasion was enacted, but the enduring and constructive result is the politically formalist insight that forms are necessary for life. By repeatedly observing how birds build their nests, Spahr searches for sources of inspiration to fight for more habitable forms and structures upon which our lives depend.

There is a significant anarchist-leaning new materialist strain in Spahr criticism. To be clear, despite my misgivings about such frameworks, many contributions to Spahr scholarship inspired by new materialist methodologies provide evocative readings of Spahr's ecopoetry. One example is Dianne Chisholm's (2014a; 2014b) Deluze-and-Guattari-inspired formal designation of Spahr's poetry as a "poetics of the refrain." There are many other readings of Spahr's poetry using new materialist frameworks that do not discuss *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* specifically, such as Tana Jean Welch (2014), who draws on Karen Barad and Donna Haraway, to argue that *Well Then There Now* (2011a) exemplifies Spahr's "inclusive posthumanist ecopoetics." Furthermore, Meliz Ergin (2017) reads Spahr's poetry through Barad's notion of the universal entanglement of matter. Alex Christie (2020) draws on Barad's agential realism (but also Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics) to argue Spahr's poetry proposes an "ethics of intra-active response-ability." Lynn Keller (2017), meanwhile, investigates Spahr's poetic mediation of the sense of place in a time of globalization, with reference to Ursula K. Heise's work. Sianne Ngai (2012) reads Spahr's autobiography, *The Transformation* (2007a), together with Latour's theorization of networks. Inspired by Rosi Braidotti's articulation of the posthuman, Heather Milne (2021) argues that Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came* (2015) exemplifies "posthuman assemblies." Finally, Margaret Ronda (2018) draws on Timothy Morton and Haraway to theorize "mourning and melancholia at the end of nature" through a reading of Spahr's *Well Then There Now*. Because most of these contributions do not examine *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, I do not spend much time to discuss them in detail. I nonetheless briefly mention them because the sheer number indicates a new materialist strain in Spahr scholarship. This reflects a general trend in ecocriticism.

As a contrast to my own reading of Spahr's poetry, three critics examining social forms in Spahr's poetry are worth consideration. Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of territorial refrains, Chisholm (2014b) designates Spahr's poetics, albeit not *TCEL* specifically, as a "poetics of the refrain." In Chisholm's words, "Spahr does more than just tinker with

variations of repetition. She invents a framework of repetition that houses a thinking that escapes the boundaries of common sense and lyrical expression" (Chisholm 2014b: 636). Chisholm does not discuss *TCEL*, but her focus on the relation between politics and nature in Spahr's poetry is relevant for my purposes. Even though she focuses on the relation between literary and political form, like I do, Chisholm draws a different conclusion from Spahr's ecopoetry than I do. Whereas Chisholm emphasizes how Spahr's ecopoetry builds refrains that are "open to a cosmos unbounded by the limits of human imagination" (Chisholm 2014b: 647), I show Spahr's insistence on finitude as the basis for true infinity, embodied in corporeal vulnerability, loving relationality, technological globalization, and forms of ecopolitics.

Writing on "infrastructures for troubling times," Lauren Berlant (2022) distinguishes between infrastructure and institutions. Rejecting institution-building, Berlant instead embraces the more affectively-attuned "liveliness of world-making [that] distinguishes infrastructures from institutions […]. Institutions enclose and congeal power, resources, and interest, and they represent their legitimacy as something solid and enduring, a predictability on which the social relies" (Berlant 2022: 95). Berlant deploys Spahr's poetry in service of this supposed abandonment of institutions in favor of more anarchist-oriented infrastructures. While Berlant rightly highlights Spahr's critiques of existing political forms and social institutions, such an ahistorical and abstract rejection of institutions is, in my view, misguided. Some institutions certainly destroy "the lifeworld of the lands and lives attached to them for survival" (Berlant 2022: 96). However, this is not an innate property of institutions, but the result of complex processes fueled by historically contingent institutions like the fossil economy.

The conflation of historical manifestations of the state with the state form in general is further evident in Seth McKelvey's (2019) reading of Spahr's poetry. In section 2.6, I provide a more detailed critique of his reading. In short, McKelvey designates Spahr's poetics as a "poetics of escape," claiming that the astronauts mentioned in the book embody Spahr's poetic ideal. McKelvey thus argues that Spahr abandons critique in favor of escape. My reading, meanwhile, demonstrates that Spahr's politically formalist ecopoetry appreciates the complex double-bind of critique and construction. Spahr evokes astronauts not as an ideal or model for politics, which McKelvey claims, but as a contrast to her own earthbound ecopoetry.

What I aim to provide in my reading of *TCEL* is a corrective to prevalent readings proclaiming that Spahr's ecopoetry rejects political forms in general. By forging the link

between ecological limits and political forms, I offer a coherent account of the whole book, thereby linking together the main issues foregrounded by Spahr: corporeal vulnerability, loving relationality, technological globalization, and ecopolitical forms.

2.2 Spahr on the Politics of Poetry

In a text titled "Poetry in a Time of Crisis" (2007b)[20] originally delivered at the 2001 Modern Language Association's annual convention, Spahr meditates on that moment in history as a state of permanent crisis. Reflecting on the politically tumultuous 1990s when she wrote *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (2001a), Spahr comments that she "hope[d] that I had been writing during unique times, that I was writing in a time of crisis." However, she quickly realized that "I had done no writing at any point in my career when the U.S. was not bombing someone (Spahr 2007b: 131). Spahr consequently asserts that "[t]here is, thus, constantly crisis. We cannot say that unique, or interesting, times arrived on September 11." She goes even further and claims that, by 2005, "[n]othing has changed since then. It is all crisis all the time. And a great deal of it caused by the United States. I rewrote this paper during the post-Iraq-war war" (Spahr 2007b: 131). Spahr's emergence as a politically-engaged poet is largely a result of her awareness of all the atrocities committed by the state in which she was born and raised. This has undoubtedly affected how she conceives of the relation between poetry and politics, both poetry's political potential but equally its limitations. In this context, Kimberly Lamm observes that "Spahr's work distinguishes itself because she writes the poems for which her critical work calls" (Lamm 2007: 134). The crucial element connecting Spahr's poetry and criticism is her insistence on the need for interpersonal relations, communities of various kinds, and political forms needed for surviving and thriving.

In *Everybody's Autonomy*—a collection of critical essays on experimental poets like Gertrude Stein, Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian, Harryette Mullen, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—Spahr offers her most sustained theoretical articulations of the value of poetry and

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[20] Thank you to Juliana Spahr for providing a moderately revised version of the paper, presented at University of California, Santa Cruz on 7 March 2005, which was subsequently published in 2007.

reading. She makes explicit that her primary interest is not in "deciphering works" but in examining "what sorts of communities works encourage. […] I am interested in works that encourage communal readings. […] I am interested in works that look at the relation between reading and identity in order to comment on the nature of collectivity" (Spahr 2001a: 5). In other words, Spahr regards reading as a potentially formative and performative activity. Writing more specifically on the value of poetry, she explains in her editor's introduction to *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002):

> I find value in lyrics that retreat from individualism and idiosyncracy by pointing to heady and unexpected yet intimate pluralisms. And lyrics that help me to place myself as part of a larger, connective culture. Lyrics that, in other words, are not at all ignorant about structures. […] Lyrics that comment on community and that move lyric away from individualism to shared, connective spaces. Lyrics that reveal how our private intimacies have public obligations and ramifications, how intimacy has a social bond with shared meaning. (Spahr 2002: 11)

This is a crucial dimension of Spahr's own revision of the lyric tradition. The lyric traditionally involves a solitary speaker lamenting the inseparable division between the speaker and an idealized beloved. Having emerged from the Language writing tradition, Spahr is distinctly aware of that tradition's "suspicion of lyric subjectivity, particularly as manifest in recent personal lyric" (Keller 2010: 74). Yet Spahr does not seek to abolish the lyric tradition but rather renew it for the contemporary moment. This requires a critique of the traditional view that public and private concerns exclude each other, a view which tends to inform the more self-indulgent forms of lyric poetry. In the wake of 9/11, Spahr recognized that certain aspects of the lyric seemed highly relevant for her own poetic practice. She reflects on the experience of living in Hawai'i at the time, which forced her to "think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all those things geographically." Because of "its attention to connection, with its dwelling on the beloved and on the afar" (*TCEL* 15), the lyric proved productive for apprehending the state of the world.

Politically, Spahr usually calls herself an anarchist, especially early in her career, yet I claim that political formalism would be a more accurate designation of Spahr's ecopoetry. In *Everybody's Autonomy*, she advocates for "anarchic reading." This reading practice, according to Spahr, does not celebrate chaos or formlessness. Referring to Gertrude Stein's poetry, Spahr explains that she "like[s] to think of her [Stein's] work as using reading to encourage a sort of

anarchy, not the sort the Sex Pistols called for where all the rules are abandoned in the name of chaos, but rather one where the work allows readers self-governance and autonomy, where the reading act is given as much authority as the authoring act" (Spahr 2001a: 13-14). For Spahr, anarchic reading is supposed to be a model of reading "that recognizes asymmetries of power and their resulting inequalities and respects separatism even as it values dialogue. And I want to join dialogue with politicized readings of forms in order to increase the complexity of models of the relations between readers and works without totalizing" (Spahr 2001a: 155). In a conversation with Joel Bettridge from 2003, published in 2005, Spahr elaborates that she is "not all that committed to tearing things down. I think of writing less as a resistant practice and more as a place where one explores new alliances and builds new structures that require lots of scaffoldings. Some of these structures fall down. But others might become entirely different forms of thoughts" (Spahr 2005b: 5). By virtue of insisting on the need for structures and scaffoldings, Spahr's position is far from what Kornbluh designates as "anarcho-vitalism." Spahr shares with political formalism the sustained efforts of critiquing particular forms yet nonetheless asserting the need to build better. Spahr's statement concerning the effort of "build[ing] new structures that require lots of scaffoldings" occurs in a published conversation and not in her poetic works, but throughout my reading of *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, I show how Spahr's poetry can more constructively be read as politically formalist.

As a form of political and poetic practice, Spahr created Commune Editions in 2015, together with fellow poets Jasper Bernes and Joshua Clover. The political orientation of the press is both anti-capitalist and anti-statist. In an interview published in 2017, and conducted by Stephen Voyce in May-June 2016, the editors of Commune Editions elaborate on their conception of the relationship between poetry and politics. Most crucially, they do not practice "poetic substitutionism" (Voyce 2017: 184), a position which substitutes poetic practice for political practice. Nor do they view poetry as a politically futile endeavor. Instead, they compare poetry's role to riot dogs because the dogs inspire, catalyze feelings, and hence make a real difference in political struggles. Thus, "[t]he metaphor is a way of describing our own modesty with regard to political effects but also our sense that we imagine the press as a part of something larger, something that can be truly transformative" (Voyce 2017: 184).

Spahr's anti-statism should not be confused with a disenchantment with social and political forms in general. Three important texts for comprehending Spahr's position on the

state form are two shorter pieces, “Contemporary U.S. Poetry and Its Nationalisms” (2011b) and “Literature and the State” (2022), in addition to her book-length treatment of literary production, *Du Bois's Telegram: State Containment and Literary Resistance* (2018). In the first article, Spahr laments the publication of “an essay collection to be distributed by U.S. embassies called *Writers on America: Fifteen Reflections*” (Spahr 2011b: 684) in the wake of 9/11.[21] Serving as literary propaganda, the collection “could not be distributed within the U.S. because of the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which forbids domestic distribution of propaganda materials intended for foreign audiences by the State Department” (Spahr 2011b: 1984). While “promot[ing] U.S. freedoms, […] much of the work [included in the collection] omits the negative role that the U.S. government plays in the lives of its citizens and does not reference the hugely detrimental impact that the U.S. government has had on the lives of citizens of other nations” (Spahr 2011b: 685). Considering the U.S.'s military interventions around the globe, it is hardly surprising that Spahr distances herself from this political form, especially when the state deploys poetry as a means by which to legitimate its imperialist “War on Terror.”

More than a decade later, “Literature and the State” was published in a collection titled *After Marx: Literature, Theory, and Value in the Twenty-First Century*. In this article, Spahr demonstrates that two opposed strands of Marxist conceptions of aesthetics, embodied by Vladimir Lenin and Theodor W. Adorno respectively, both “overlook or elide the pernicious role of the state” (Spahr 2022: 131). Spahr critiques any versions of Marxist aesthetics that resort to state affirmation, and she instead insists that any anti-capitalist poetics worthy of its name must take inspiration from “revolutionary moments such as the Russian Revolution or the Paris Commune or the anti-colonial movements of the 1950s and 1960s” (Spahr 2022: 132). In Spahr's view, insisting on art's autonomy necessarily leads to this assertion, which she demonstrates with reference to Arthur Rimbaud and Aime Césaire (Spahr 2022: 139-140), before she proclaims the need for more theoretically-informed anarchist engagements with aesthetic theory. Spahr states that “[i]f there is a sort of hidden agenda to this essay, it is that there is much to gain from putting Marxist (but not Bolshevik) and anarchist theories of

[21] In *Du Bois's Telegram*, Spahr describes the collection as an “opening volley in a new round of the old fight by the state to occupy literature in English” (Spahr 2018: 149ff).

literature closer together than they often are" (Spahr 2022: 141). The commonality is that they both offer critiques of the nation-state as a politically destructive and debilitating form.

In the period between these two shorter pieces, Spahr published a book-length treatment of the relation between literature and politics, which is *Du Bois's Telegram* (2018). The book, partly autobiographical (Spahr 2018: 10; 110; 187; 191-192), is an articulation of the relation between politics—through the form of the modern state in its American variety—and literary forms of resisting and critiquing the state as an oppressive social form. In its conclusion, Spahr explains that she thinks "of this book as a sort of auto-ethnographic project, an attempt to describe the way literature circulates in the very scenes in which I also circulate" (Spahr 2018: 191). The more concrete aim of the book is to examine "how literary production is shaped by forces external to it" (Spahr 2018: 26), primarily the substantial efforts of the U.S. State Department to influence processes of literary production and distribution over the past century. Concerning the issue of aesthetic autonomy, Spahr explains that she considers literature to be "autonomous when it is free from outside interference, from the market, from the government," but she "do[es] not consider the moments when writers decide to align their work with various political movements a restriction on autonomy." Artistic autonomy, for Spahr, does not mean "freedom from politics even though it is often used to mean this" (Spahr 2018: 16-17).

Without recapitulating the history of governmental interference in cultural production that Spahr traces, I want to briefly consider her concluding remarks. Writing on literature as a site of resistance, Spahr laments that the current structural conditions limit literature's political potential. Despite such lamentations, I would emphasize that the crucial point to recall is that literature cannot change the world on its own. Spahr's primary literary form, poetry, may be most politically productive when it embodies the role that the editors of Commune Editions highlighted: like riot dogs capable of catalyzing feelings. Literature may serve a limited but crucial political role by catalyzing feelings, revealing the constructedness of social forms, and inspiring collective emancipatory struggles. These are the conditions for autonomous cultural production, and Spahr suggests that reform is not sufficient for achieving artistic autonomy:

"Revolution though. There is some historical precedence that it is revolution that frees cultural production from the institutions that constantly work to contain it" (Spahr 2018: 193).[22]

Spahr's work in general, and *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* in particular, is part of a contemporary tradition known as ecopoetry. This tradition arose at the end of the 20th century as a result of increasing global ecological awareness. Despite being related to nature poetry, ecopoetry is a distinct movement, and received a definitive description by Jonathan Skinner in the first edition of the poetry journal *Ecopoetics* (2001). In the Editor's Statement, Skinner reflects on the movement's name: "'Eco' here signals—no more, no less—the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth. 'Poetics' is used as *poesis* or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act (nor vice versa). Thus: ecopoetics, a house making" (Skinner 2001: 7). This description has a politically formalist inflection because it emphasizes the importance of both critique and creation (or construction). Construction without critique is empty, critique without construction is blind.[23]

In an interview from 2016, Spahr is asked whether she identifies herself as an ecopoet, upon which she insists that the crucial distinction "about contemporary poetry about plants and birds and animals and fish is the distinction between a celebration of the natural world in a lyric form that frequently presumes that humans are not a part of it (often this is the tradition that gets called nature poetry) and a more systemic approach that also acknowledges certain things that are happening to the environment as a result of capitalism (a form of ecopoetry)" (Goldsmith and Spahr 2016: 413). Instead of promoting poetry which apolitically romanticizes the natural world or mourns its end, Spahr prefers poetry which is not just "about a beautiful bird in a tree" but "about a beautiful bird and the bulldozer off to the side that is coming to destroy the tree" (Goldsmith and Spahr 2016: 413). To insist on the politicized dimension of the destruction of nature is a central element of ecopoetry because this tradition at its roots, and

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[22] In this context, Spahr refers to Kristin Ross's work on the Paris Commune, Robin D. G. Kelley's work on the Watts riots, and of course W. E. B. Du Bois, who likewise noticed "the importance of literature to the various anticolonial revolutions that were happening, notic[ed] the buzzing hives, and also notic[ed] the government's attempts to contain these hives" (Spahr 2018: 194).

[23] The reference is to Immanuel Kant's phrase in *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant 1998: 193-194, A51/B75).

etymology, explores the making and unmaking of forms of habitation. This is the root of the connection I seek to make between Spahr's ecopoetry and her political formalism. Because ecopoetry emphasizes how our planet is the shared home of all earthlings, political formalism's insistence on the need for political forms, social institutions, and economic modes of production is a fertile ground to elucidate the link between these terms.

2.3 Corporeal Vulnerability[24]

As I explained in chapter 1, being truly infinite does not mean to be without limits. Finite beings are truly infinite insofar as they acknowledge their own inherent limits by self-relating through otherness. Such otherness may take a variety of forms, and self-relation is by no means unique to human beings. All organisms must undergo metabolic processes to sustain their own lives. Recalling the succinct definition of true infinity provided by Davis, "I am infinite as a potentially limited being that overcomes limitation and relates to itself by means of infinite (circular) activities" (Davis 183). One such instance of self-relation through otherness is breathing, which is a central concern in the first part of *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. By incorporating the air surrounding me, I sustain my own life. I cannot survive for long without interacting with my surroundings, an activity which is largely automatized but still vital for me as a finite organism. By virtue of being organisms with lungs, all of us depend on the atmosphere and air quality in our local environments, unevenly distributed as the air may be, and the spaces we inhabit are "uneven space[s], made by this pattern of bodies" (*TCEL* 4).

Spahr wrote the first part of *TCEL*, as its title indicates ("Poem Written after September 11"), shortly after the terrorist attacks. Having personally witnessed the deadliest terrorist attack in human history (Spahr 2007b: 131), Spahr meditates on the titular everyone's sheer corporeal vulnerability. She speaks about several interrelated forms of connectivity, primarily cells, skin, space, and breathing, which are, in Milne's words, "the most basic elements of embodied subjectivity" (Milne 2014: 206). Spahr begins at the cellular level, speaking about "the

[24] Portions of this section are adapted from a term paper written for a course on American poetry offered in the Spring semester of 2022, but the content has been substantially reframed, revised, and expanded.

movement of cells and the division of cells" (*TCEL* 3), and gradually moves outward to bodily organs like hands and feet, which are surrounded by skin (*TCEL* 3). Many scholars have noted the pattern of expanding and contracting concentric spaces. Astrid Franke argues that this technique functions as a "mimetic principle giving rise before our eyes and ears to a sense of aesthetic creation as natural propagation and growth" (Franke 2008: 73). Spahr's paragraphs contain distinct phrases like "the space between the hands" and "the space of the oceans." Yet any neat separation is undercut because all the phrases are "connected by the subordinating conjunction 'as' to the […] main clause" (Franke 2008: 73) but also due to the lack of punctuation and capitalization.

By focusing on our corporeality as finite beings, Spahr highlights the fact that we are all exposed to the sufferings and joys of the world due to the infinite connections and relations in which we are embedded. Even at the cellular level, we perceive shapes, like "a shape of blood beating and cells dividing" (*TCEL* 3), which underscores how reality is inescapably formed according to patterns. In the second part of the book, Spahr returns to the imagery of cells and asserts that "[e]mbedded deep in our cells is ourselves and everyone else" (*TCEL* 31). She thereby calls attention to our connections as multicellular organisms. Specifically, her use of assonance suggests the integral connection between "our cells," "ourselves," and "everyone else." By decomposing the human subject to our organic composition at the cellular level, Spahr points out how we are all exposed to the fragile environments we inhabit.

Breathing is not only a thematic focus in the first part of *TCEL* but equally a structuring principle insofar as the reading experience functions as a breathing exercise. According to Moberley Luger, a potential source of inspiration for Spahr's technique is "Ericksonian hypnosis": "At the time of [9/11], Spahr was taking a course in Ericksonian hypnosis, a technique that attempts to induce behavioral changes like quitting smoking." Luger explains further that "[s]ome lines in the poem come directly from Ericksonian techniques" (Luger 2017: 185). As the poem unfolds, the prose paragraphs expand incrementally (*TCEL* 4-9), lacking any form of punctuation that would indicate a time for pause and reflection. The longest paragraph, consisting of 12 lines in the printed book, reads as follows:

> The entering in and out of the space of the mesosphere in the entering in and out of the space of the stratosphere in the entering in and out of the space of the troposphere in the entering in and out of the space of the oceans in the entering in and out of the space of the continents and islands in the entering in

> and out of the space of the nations in the entering in and out of the space of the regions in the entering in and out of the space of the cities in the entering in and out of the space of the neighborhoods nearby in the entering in and out of the space of the building in the entering in and out of the space of the room in the entering in and out of the space around the hands in the entering in and out of the space between the hands. (*TCEL* 9)

During the act of reading the increasingly longer prose paragraphs, we are encouraged to read each of them in single breaths, even if Spahr may not do so herself when she reads this section at poetry readings. With reference to the second longest paragraph of this part (*TCEL* 8; 8 lines), Christopher Arigo observes that "[w]ith some difficulty, one can read this passage in a single breath, and since the subject of the piece is breath itself, it would seem like a fair estimation that this is in fact how it is meant to be read" (Arigo 2008: 14). The reasons for such a claim are, first, that the initial paragraphs are so short that one would naturally read them in single breaths and, second, the lack of punctuation and capitalization. Concerning the second point, Milne explains that the lack of punctuation and capitalization means that "[t]here are no obvious pauses where the reader can stop to take a breath and as the sentences get longer with each repetition, the reader's lung capacity is stretched to its limit" (Milne 2014: 217). Prior to the preceding quote, Milne articulates the convergence between thematic focus and formal technique: "The poem's repetitive structure and cyclical expansion and contraction echo the act of breathing. When reading the poem aloud, one becomes especially conscious of one's own breath and, by extension, of one's own embodiment" (Milne 2014: 217).

Franke offers a different way of reading this section: to breathe "discretely, in which case the rhythm is likely to assume an even, meditative pace" (Franke 2008: 73). In that case, the reader is still made distinctly aware of their own corporeality because, Franke observes, "the most frequent connective [used in this section], 'and the,' echoes the double-beat of the heart" (Franke 2008: 73). On a formal level, Spahr thereby enables her readers to acknowledge their own corporeal limits as constitutive of the reading experience. Of course, it is entirely possible to read these pages silently and without paying attention to the serial repetition, concentric expansiveness, and lack of punctuation. But an attentive reader will nonetheless recognize that the reading experience is implicated in Spahr's ecopoetry. As readers, we are invited to ponder how our survival depends on what lies mostly beyond our immediate control, like the air surrounding us, and how this is a predicament shared among all breathing beings.

The limit which constitutes an individual embodied being's lung capacity is not an external stumbling block. Such a limit is internal to the organism because the limit constitutes the possibility for breathing as a form of self-maintenance. Lung capacity is, moreover, not a static limit but inherently dynamic or plastic. In relation to its governing organism, lung capacity is both formed by and can form the organism. In her theorization of the concept of plasticity offered in *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic* (2005), Catherine Malabou explains that plasticity signals "a capacity to receive form and a capacity to produce form. It is this double signification which enables us to treat the adjective as itself a 'speculative word', in Hegel's special sense" (Malabou 2005: 9). Trying to imagine a living being without some form of mechanism for breathing to maintain itself as an organism is unintelligible because breathing is one of the preconditions for life.

As breathing beings, we are exposed to the many dangers of the environment, like potentially lethal dust from collapsing buildings (*TCEL* 9-10) or infectious diseases spreading through bodies. Spahr appropriately ends the first part of the book by simultaneously celebrating and lamenting our connections with everyone else: "[h]ow lovely and how doomed this connection of everyone with lungs" (*TCEL* 10). This is an insight through which Spahr precludes any simplistic oppositional thinking whereby "this connection of everyone with lungs" would be either wholly affirmed or wholly condemned. Finally, it is worth remarking that breath has thus far been the source of several major historical events in recent years—first and foremost the Covid-19 pandemic.[25] In the American context, the numerous killings of African-Americans at the hands of white police officers have led to the words "I can't breathe" being used as a slogan during Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, which garnered worldwide attention in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020.[26]

As the example of breathing indicates, it is only through various forms of limits that we can sustain ourselves at all. Another exemplary form of corporeal limit which Spahr highlights

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[25] To my knowledge, the "mysterious flu that appeared in Hong Kong and had spread by morning to other parts of Asia" (*TCEL* 66), which Spahr mentions in the section written on 16 March 2003, is SARS-CoV-1, Covid-19's (SARS-CoV-2) viral precursor.

[26] Like with George Floyd, "I can't breathe" were the final words of Eric Garner, who was killed in a similar way on 17 July 2014, the original incident which led to BLM protesters adopting the slogan.

is skin. Skin is what separates an organism from another but equally what makes contact between organisms possible. Addressing her plural beloveds, Spahr laments that "yours skins is a boundary separating yous from the rest of yous" (*TCEL* 19). More concretely, she laments that the racialization of skin or "the arbitrary connotations of color have made all this brushing against one another even harder for all of us" (*TCEL* 23). Racism is one of the primary ways that human beings disavow their own connections with others, a procedure which rejects the possibility of loving others whose connections to oneself are more fundamental than the "arbitrary connotations of color." However, even if "skin is our largest organ and [...] it keeps us contained," Spahr insists that when she "speak[s] of skin I speak of the crowds that are gathering all together to meet each other with various intents" (*TCEL* 22). Skin may be a limit, but as Kornbluh asserts, by reversing the order of words used in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: "Every limit is an ending, but also a beginning" (Kornbluh 2019: 79). Because finite beings are socially dependent on others to survive and thrive, we are not completely self-sufficient. Depending on others is a condition of possibility for leading a meaningful life.

2.4 Loving Relationality

One relational form through which finite organisms may sustain themselves is love, a crucial thematic focus in *TCEL*. Throughout the book, Spahr consistently speaks to her plural beloveds in the form of yous, thereby bending the conventions of standard English grammar. Keller explains the biographical source of Spahr's invocation of plural beloveds: "Readers of Spahr's memoir [*The Transformation*] will be aware of the biographical basis for this plural in Spahr's involvement in a romantic threesome during her years in Hawai'i" (Keller 2010: 76). However, the biographical source of this formal element is not important, partly because this is never disclosed within *TCEL*, but the function of this element is still crucial. In Keller's view, the plurality of Spahr's beloveds signals "an expansive ambiguity that is thematically significant: the beloved addressed is also a collective, apparently one that includes the book's readership" (Keller 2010: 76). In that sense, Spahr's address to her plural beloveds is not only a praise of her embodied beloveds. On the contrary, it also indicates a more general and expansive insistence on interpersonal relations, in which the reader is invited to participate.

The variant of lyric poetry through which Spahr insists on the indispensability of loving relations is praise poetry. This is a tradition inherited from the ancient Greek poet Sappho (Keller 2010: 76). Keller observes that the section from *TCEL* dated 20 January 2003 (*TCEL* 45-47) is a direct allusion to one of Sappho's poems meditating on the most beautiful thing in the world (Keller 2010: 79). Like Sappho's original poem, Spahr uses anaphoric repetitions to establish a contrast between what "some say" and what "I say" is the most beautiful thing in the world. The things claimed to be most beautiful by the indeterminate "some" are all military in nature, such as "thronging cavalry," "a troop of horses," "one hundred and twenty Challenger Two tanks," "a host of antiarmor AH-64 Apache attack helicopters," and more specifically, "the thirty thousand assault troops from Britain today joining the sixty-two thousand from the US mobilized in the past ten days and a further sixty thousand from the US on their way" (*TCEL* 45-46). In contrast to those who glorify the military as something beautiful,[27] Spahr unconditionally affirms what she perceives as the most beautiful thing in the world:

> But I say it's whatever you love best.
> I say it is the persons you love.
> I say it is those things, whatever they are, that one loves and desires.
> I say it's what one loves.
> It's what one loves, the most beautiful is whomever one loves.
> I say it is whatsoever a person loves.
> I say for me it is my beloveds.
> For me naught else, it is my beloveds, it is the loveliest sight.
> I say the sight of the ones you love.
> I say it again, the sight of the ones you love, those you've met and those you haven't.
> I say it again and again.
> Again and again.
> I try to keep saying it to keep making it happen.
> I say it again, the sight of the ones you love, those you've met and those you haven't. (*TCEL* 46-47)

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[27] Like fascist futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who "glorified the colonisation of Libya. A witness to the aerial bombing of that country in 1911 – the first deployment of aeroplanes in war – he considered it 'the most beautiful aesthetic spectacle of my life'" (Malm and The Zetkin Collective 2021: 404).

This section perfectly encapsulates the well-known phrase by Gertrude Stein, one of Spahr's favorite poets. Responding to critiques of the use of repetition in her poetry, Stein states that "I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. […] expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis" (Stein 1985: 166-167).[28] Stein elaborates that varying the emphasis of, for instance, a story one tells multiple times, is what makes the story feel alive rather than an automatic repetition when told anew. Repetitious insistence is one of the primary formal elements Spahr deploys in *TCEL*, and according to Milne, "Spahr develops a poetics of connection through repetition […]. With chant-like, meditative repetition, she builds increasingly longer utterances that move from individual cell to body to community and eventually to world" (Milne 2014: 207). Regarding the above-cited block quotation, Spahr uses a variety of ways of insisting on what the most beautiful thing in the world is. As she explicitly makes clear in the penultimate line of the section, the point of insisting has a performative dimension insofar as Spahr "tr[ies] to keep saying it to keep making it happen." This performative dimension of Spahr's project of writing *TCEL* is crucial for apprehending the potential political efficacy of poetry, a point to which I return below.[29]

In section 1.2, I drew attention to love as an embodiment of true infinity because participating in loving relations is necessary for becoming and sustaining oneself. Being committed to loving relations with others is not a restriction of my freedom but the very condition of possibility for my freedom as "being at home with myself in another." Love is infinite in the sense that it is always open to reevaluations of current relations and to the possibility of establishing new ones. In this context, it is significant that the only line in the preceding block quotation that is repeated verbatim is the line which goes "I say it again, the

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[28] Keller likewise invokes, without quoting, this Steinian formula (Keller 2010: 80). In a similar vein, Franke offers a brief discussion of the Whitmanian and Steinian influence on Spahr's use of repetition (Franke 2008: 72-73). Charles Altieri poignantly remarks that "many of the finest moments in Spahr's poetry [build] Whitmanian expansiveness out of Steinian repetition" (Altieri 2011: 134), which Esther Sánchez-Pardo cites after quoting Stein (Sánchez-Pardo 2021: 118n6; 123).

[29] See Altieri (2011) for an exploration of Spahr's rhetorical performativity.

sight of the ones you love, those you've met and those you haven't." Because the other lines are repeated with slight variations, this one stands out and is thereby endowed greater significance. The most beautiful thing in the world, Spahr affirms, is the sight of the people you already know and love, but also those you have never encountered but who might open new horizons for loving relations. In the context of love, the circularity of true infinity is thus not self-enclosed, but always open to revision and expansion.

Love is sometimes seen as an entirely private and domestic matter, separated from the concerns of the public, yet as Spahr's meditations on intimacy and complicity make utterly clear, the division between private and public has become increasingly more porous in recent years. In a certain sense, one could argue that such a blurring of boundaries leads to the destruction of both the private and public spheres alike. Spahr highlights this development to insist that we must somehow grapple with this condition. Retreating to a safe haven to escape thorny political issues seems both irresponsible and impossible when, as Spahr puts it, "the military-industrial complex enters our bed at night" (*TCEL* 63). For Spahr, intimacy is not simply bodily proximity. As Milne poignantly elaborates: "Intimacy is configured as a way of conceptualizing connectivity and as a means through which to establish accountability and reciprocity. [...] Intimacy, then, is both private *and* public and is shared between two or more individuals" (Milne 2014: 209). Consequently, retreating to the private sphere is an unviable and detrimental strategy.

2.5 Technological Globalization

Recalling the explanatory note in *TCEL*, Spahr reflects on how 9/11 forced her to "think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all those things geographically," such as the U.S. military-industrial complex. Preceding this remark, Spahr admits that upon realizing that the U.S. would likely invade Iraq, she "thought that by watching the news more seriously I could be a little less naive. But I gained no sophisticated understanding as I wrote these poems" (*TCEL* 13). Throughout the second and longer part of the book, Spahr meditates on the news media's failure to adequately mediate and make comprehensible the current situation by "not telling the necessary truths" (*TCEL* 33). In fact, *TCEL* uses media technology in a procedural way. While writing, Spahr urgently followed

the 24-hour news cycle to try to understand the state of the world. The function of the dates at the start of each section is to instantiate a minimal internal limit structuring the book. The division into discrete sections thereby functions as a minimal formal affirmation of finitude as productive. Yet Spahr did not decide in advance how much she would write on a given date or when the book would be finished. Considering that Spahr began writing the second half of the book when she realized the U.S. would invade Iraq, it is fitting that she wrote the final section (titled "March 27 and 30, 2003") only about a week after the actual invasion was initiated.

Spahr's usage of forms of media technology in *TCEL* has been discussed by multiple critics. In Nerys Williams's view, "[g]lobal information and newsgathering systems form a key component of Spahr's volume and she insistently calls upon poetry as a medium of thought and enquiry" (Williams 2013: 186). Sophie Mayer, meanwhile, observes that *TCEL* "uses an aggregator poetics to look critically at the systemic intersection of national and personal boundaries. The collection argues that identity is not unitary, but composed communally at and through contested boundaries, including boundary issues around access to information" (Mayer 2009: 49). Such a designation of an "aggregator poetics" is inspired, according to Mayer, by newsfeeds that compile information from a pre-determined list of sources (Mayer 2009: 55).

Throughout the book, Spahr makes explicit reference to the news in general (*TCEL* 13; 17; 25; 33; 37-38; 44; 49), and the technological forms through which she follows the news, such as radio (*TCEL* 50-51), television (*TCEL* 25; 33; 62; 69), and the Internet (*TCEL* 33; 50; 57; 59). Tele-communicational technologies like the Internet harbor the potential to bring people together by creating a sense of global connectedness. The relative instantaneity also makes it easier to spontaneously organize political protests. However, the quasi-erasure of distance inherent in technologies like radio, television, and the Internet complicates the notion of intimate complicity by highlighting the already-mediated nature of interpersonal relations. In this context, the lyric form proves highly relevant for Spahr's purposes. Because the lyric formally attends to the complex relation between connection and separation, Spahr uses it to meditate on the mediation between the near and far away others on which our lives depend.

Spahr notes a clear contrast between what is included in the news and what remains excluded, hence being available only as unofficial rumors. In the section from 8 December 2002, Spahr repeats a rumor that "ships are being fueled and then are slipping out of port slowly at night" (*TCEL* 37), indicating that the war preparations are underway. Anaphorically insisting

that “I hear rumors” from “mothers in the street talking to other mothers, “from lovers in line at the grocery talking among themselves,” and “from friends at parties,” Spahr still “can’t see [the rumors] in the news” (*TCEL* 37). Yet because the news relates catastrophes from other corners of the world, Spahr reflects on the content of the news. This includes “one hundred and thirty-six people dead by politics’ human hands,” all of which “had numerous people who felt the same way about them” as Spahr feels about her own beloveds (*TCEL* 38-39). Despite broadcasting deaths from around the world, the news nonetheless refuses to acknowledge the rumors about the U.S. preparations for the invasion of Iraq. Another month passes until “[w]hat we heard as rumor a few weeks ago has become a listing in the daily news” (*TCEL* 44).

Spahr’s decision to write about this period in a diary-like format simultaneously personalizes and de-personalizes the experience, and both aspects are required for apprehending the situation. Technological globalization makes us more distinctly aware of events happening around the globe, yet the quasi-erasure of distance may paradoxically lead to hopeless paralysis if no lines of action appear visible and viable. This medial duplicity affects Spahr in a way which many readers may find relatable. On 15 March 2003, more than a month after the preceding entry, she tells her beloveds that “weeks ago the doubleness of the news broke me down and I stopped writing and stopped loving all humans, mainly myself” (*TCEL* 57). Spahr often refers to the relations in which she is engaged with her beloveds, yet she openly admits that “my ties with yous are not unique” (*TCEL* 38). These ties are irreplaceable and Spahr’s beloveds could not have been substituted by others without radically altering those relations. Simultaneously, having such ties is not unique to Spahr and her beloveds. There are countless other ties between different others who are equally yet incomparably unique, some of which are being shattered by “politics’ human hands.” Spahr thus anaphorically insists that “[c]hances are that each of those one hundred and thirty-six people dead by politics’ human hands” (*TCEL* 39) had lovers, families, friends, pets, and a range of ordinary and extraordinary things with which they made their lives meaningful. By evoking the unique singularity of every being and its relations to others, Spahr invites her readers to imagine the infinite complexity of the lives lost, even as we would never fully accomplish such a task. That Spahr nonetheless tries to formally enact such a procedure through her poetry indicates the responsibility inherent in the work of a politically-engaged poet like herself. She tries to understand the general tendencies of the state of the world while simultaneously imagining the complex specificity of individual

lives, rather than being lured by the abstract generality promulgated by advanced forms of media technology. This leads us to Spahr's evocations of images of the Earth seen from space.

Drawing on my discussion of Oliver's *Earth and World* in section 1.4, I will now elucidate how Spahr's meditations on technological globalization foreground the alluring desire to escape. Throughout *TCEL*, Spahr frequently makes explicit reference to extraterrestrial space (*TCEL* 25; 26; 32; 34-36; 46; 60; 63). Several textual spots recall Oliver's focus on the images of the Earth seen from space. Reflecting on the news that a group of astronauts are returning from the international space station, Spahr quotes one of the astronauts saying, "[h]ow massive the earth is; how minute the atmosphere," upon which Spahr lamentingly asks her beloveds: "what do we do but keep breathing as best we can this minute atmosphere?" (*TCEL* 26).[30] There is a mournful note in this recognition of the finitude of the Earth's atmosphere, a note which is repeated throughout. More significantly, Spahr meditates on the exact issue which animates Oliver's project in *Earth and World*, the relatively recent technological possibility of viewing Earth from extraterrestrial space:

> Beloveds, those astronauts on the space station began their trip home a few days ago and sent ahead of them images of the earth from space.
> In space, the earth is a firm circle of atmosphere and the ocean and the land exist in equilibrium. The forces of nature are in the blue and the white and the green.
> All is quiet.
> All the machinery, all the art is in the quiet.
> Something in me jumps when I see these images, jumps toward comfort and my mind settles.
> This, I think, is one of the most powerful images in our time of powers.
> Perhaps it isn't lovers in ours beds that matter, perhaps it is the earth.
> Not the specific in our bed at night but the globe in our mind, a globe that we didn't really see until the twentieth century, with all its technologies and variations on the mirror. (*TCEL* 34-35)

The images of Earth seen from space bespeak the planet's spatial finitude, but as Spahr notices, these images efface the infinitely detailed variations around the globe. The images captured by the astronauts present a calm and harmonious planet. Shortly after the block quotation, Spahr remarks that "[e]verything looked pristine and sparkled from space. All the machinery, all the

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[30] See Merola (2018) for an exploration of Anthropocene anxiety in *TCEL*, inspired by this passage.

art was in the pristine sparkle of the ocean and its kindness to land. The ocean was calm." She momentarily wishes "to speak with the calmness of the world seen from space and to forget the details" (*TCEL* 35). Yet even during these moments of imagining a world free of conflict and details, Spahr undermines this calmness with reference to what the bigger picture excludes, details like the buildings of Waikīkī or the brackish water of Ala Wai (*TCEL* 35). Although she declares "this poem" to be "an attempt to speak with the calmness of the world seen from space and to forget the details," Spahr immediately qualifies this statement by proclaiming that the poem is simultaneously "an attempt to speak of clouds that appear in endless and beautiful patterns" which "we see *from beneath*" (*TCEL* 35, emphasis added). Spahr's technique entails viewing the Earth from above and below to mediate the tension between the opposing perspectives. To render visible the complexity of terrestrial life, Spahr deems it necessary to present such conflicting perspectives in a productive dialogue to attain a better, albeit never perfect, apprehension. As I argue in the next section, the rest of *TCEL* unequivocally indicates Spahr's appreciation of the ineradicable conflictual nature of life on Earth. She does not view serene calmness as an unrealizable ideal but as an undesirable state bereft of life.

Spahr's ambivalent reactions to the images of the Earth underline Oliver's point that the original images, *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble*, gave rise to two conflicting fantasies: One World and Whole Earth. "One World is," Oliver explains, "the idea that technoscience can unite all of the nations of the world, while Whole Earth is the idea that concern for the shared environment can unite all peoples on the fragile planet Earth" (Oliver 2015: 14-15). Oliver's contention is that proponents of both views risk mistaking these images for the Earth itself, thereby rendering finite what is truly infinite and irreducible. Because "both images show only part of Earth, indeed, a fraction of the Earth," "we *did not* see what we thought that we saw" (Oliver 2015: 20). This fundamental limit cannot be abolished—not even with more detailed technologies like Google Earth. "The Whole Earth cannot be captured from any human vantage point, even one floating in a space capsule orbiting the moon or any other point in space" due to the phenomenological principle that "the human perspective is always only partial; there is always something that is occluded and missing from our viewpoint" (Oliver 2015: 20). Although the more advanced and sophisticated satellite technologies that have been developed since the 1970s are undoubtedly instructive for scientific and educational purposes, these technologies cannot offer a complete representation of life on Earth. Finally, it is worth remarking that the

perspective from which the images of Earth were taken is "an impossible viewpoint where no one could live." As Oliver explains, "in order to shoot those images, astronauts were propelled into inhospitable space in an unsustainable and precarious artificial environment where their very survival was uncertain" (Oliver 2015: 19). This extraterrestrial perspective contrasts radically with the perspective from which breathing beings may read Spahr's ecopoetry. Like life as we know it, Spahr's ecopoetry is distinctly earthbound.

2.6 Forms of Ecopolitics

The crucial takeaway from Spahr's thematization of extraterrestrial space is that she emphatically rejects escape as a productive political strategy. I argue this in opposition to McKelvey's designation of Spahr's poetry as an "escape poetics" (McKelvey 2019: 845).[31] He draws on Albert O. Hirschman's distinction between voice and exit as forms of political response. McKelvey explains that "voice is an important feedback mechanism for improving social organizations" because it "communicates dissatisfaction" and thereby provides the organization with "information necessary to make changes" (McKelvey 2019: 842). Exit, by contrast, consists in simply "leaving the organization rather than protesting or complaining to its leaders" (McKelvey 2019: 842). This second strategy, according to McKelvey, can be identified as "a significant political aspiration in much contemporary American poetry" (McKelvey 2019: 842), including Spahr's. To support this claim, McKelvey emphasizes Spahr's self-avowed anarchist leanings and argues that her anarchist-inspired poetry is an attempt to escape the state form.[32] This is a plausible argument, yet I maintain that Spahr is not

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[31] Segments of the first five paragraphs of this section have been adapted but substantially reframed, revised, and expanded from the same term paper mentioned at the start of section 2.3.

[32] One could supplement my examination of Spahr's theorization of the relation between poetry and politics by pointing to other passages from *Everybody's Autonomy* where she describes anarchic reading "as a form of self-governing that resembles Peter Kropotkin's territorial and functional decentralization" (Spahr 2001a: 13) or her assertion that "[b]y using anarchism as a model for reading literature, I am attempting to suggest a nonintrusive model for acknowledging the cultural connections, the semi-autonomy that occurs in literature" and that "[a]narchic reading as I have envisioned it here values elasticity of responses" (Spahr 2001a: 155).

primarily concerned with poetry as a means of escape, even though she critiques the nation-state's violent histories and false promises. In my view, McKelvey ignores certain crucial dimensions of Spahr's theorization of the relation between poetry and politics, like the above-cited passage from the interview with Joel Bettridge where she states: "I think of writing less as a resistant practice and more as a place where one explores new alliances and builds new structures that require lots of scaffoldings. Some of these structures fall down. But others might become entirely different forms of thoughts" (Spahr 2005b: 5).

Although Spahr prefers the anarchist label, partly due to the tainted histories of socialist and communist labels but equally due to real disagreements with the latter traditions, I argue that Kornbluh's political formalism is a more apt designation. Spahr's insistence on the need for building new social structures indicates that political formalism is a suitable designation. In one of her minimal definitions of the politically formalist ethos, Kornbluh asserts that "humans cannot exist without forms that scaffold sociability, even though the particular forms that human sociality takes are not fixed. Laws for the making of life are foundational, but no foundational law lives" (Kornbluh 5). This assertion fits nicely with how Spahr understands the role of poetry. Put differently, human life is necessarily formed, but the forms of sociality which we all co-constitute together as social beings are not ontologically grounded. The forms we build are inherently reformable, and that is what anarcho-vitalism misses, according to Kornbluh. McKelvey correctly identifies Spahr's critique of state violence (McKelvey 851; 856). However, Spahr is not critiquing an ahistorical political form called "the state" and its acts of violence but the historically specific manifestation of the state which the U.S. embodies at the time of her writing. McKelvey's categorial mistake is to conflate the U.S. state in its current form with the state form in general.

Clearly the state form cannot be wholly disentangled from its historical manifestations, and the modern nation-state is not necessarily the pre-given telos of human civilization. This is, however, not what political formalism claims. In the conclusion to *The Order of Forms*, Kornbluh mentions Jodi Dean's and Fredric Jameson's attempts at rethinking forms of collectivity via their respective examples of the party and the army as what Kornbluh calls "nascent political formalisms today" (Kornbluh 2019: 159-162). In a similar vein, Hägglund makes a useful distinction between those aspects of the state which require abolition to achieve human emancipation (like state oppression) and those aspects of the state which are necessary

for the sustenance of human life (like collective self-organization). Drawing on Hegel's analysis of the modern state form in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hägglund explains:

> For Hegel, an actual free society is one in which we can recognize our commitment to the common good as the condition of possibility for our own freedom. Rather than seeing the laws of the state as imposed on us and as coercively restricting our self-interest, we should be able to see ourselves as bound to the laws of the state by virtue of our own commitment to lead a free life, which requires that the laws of the state in turn are seen as contestable and transformable by us. (Hägglund 2019: 231-232)

Hägglund is thus using the term "state" to describe collective self-organization and not a particular embodiment like a modern European nation-state or the U.S.'s imperialist tendencies.

This disentanglement of the state form's complex formal and historical aspects demonstrates that framing Spahr's poetry as a poetics of escape from the state is misguided. McKelvey's discussion of Spahr's usage of astronauts in *TCEL* is revealing in this context. He claims that the astronauts "embody an escape from the connection of everyone with lungs" and calls it "Spahr's poetic goal" (McKelvey 853). McKelvey unfortunately neglects mentioning that NASA's space missions were one of the U.S.'s main avenues for propaganda during the Cold War, a period filled with widespread state violence and nuclear rearmament. In that sense, the astronauts embody no escape from the state but function as prime exemplars of the state's ideological reinforcement through appeals to a supposedly common humanity (or any other abstractly universal slogans like "we're all in this together").[33] If Neil Armstrong's first step on the moon were a giant leap for mankind, the gains from this leap has clearly been unevenly distributed among this common humanity. To be sure, McKelvey clarifies that Spahr's escape poetics is "social and communal rather than solipsistic" (McKelvey 867). I agree with McKelvey to the extent that he also reads Spahr as searching for new forms of collective self-organization. In the end, signifiers nonetheless have a real effect in the world. This is why I argue that Kornbluh's "political formalism" is a more accurate and productive designation of Spahr's poetics, regardless of whether she would endorse such a characterization.

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[33] Spahr writes explicitly on this slogan in an earlier text, "Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours" (2001c), later included in her *Well Then There Now*. In *#Misanthropocene: 24 Theses* (2014), Spahr and fellow poet Joshua Clover offer a related critique of this abstract form of universality.

The calmness of the Earth evoked by Spahr contrasts radically with the tensions inherent in the military conflicts and the political protests opposing the coming invasion of Iraq. In the section written on 1 December 2002, for instance, Spahr lists several entities and events in the world, including "the forty-seven dead in Caracas," "the four dead in Palestine," "the three dead in Israel," after which she proclaims that she "speak[s] of those dead in other parts of the world who go unreported" (*TCEL* 19-20). In a striking passage, Spahr captures both the generality and the specificity of political conflicts: "the spinning earth, the gathering forces of some sort of destruction that is endless and happens over and over, each detail more horrific, each time more people hurt, each way worse and worse and yet each conflict with its own specific history, many of them histories that we allowed to be formed while we enjoyed the touch of each others in the night" (*TCEL* 36). Political conflicts are common and political harmony is not a desirable goal for Spahr. Even if political conflicts happen all the time, they are never exact repetitions of previous conflicts. The Steinian formula that there is never repetition but only insistence thus holds for the political dimension of Spahr's book.

Alongside repetition, lists are the most significant formal element in *TCEL*, and Spahr's lists highlight the difference between bad and true infinity. Spahr even begins the book by indicating that what follows is a list: "There are these things" (*TCEL* 3).[34] In the first section of *TCEL*, Spahr catalogues aspects of corporeal vulnerability, which I discussed in section 2.3. The longest conventional list Spahr uses in the book contains 114 places around the globe (*TCEL* 54) where "[o]ver eight million people marched on five continents against the mobilization [for war]" (*TCEL* 53). By listing 114 places filled with "crowd after crowd," where "[t]he images differ only in the surroundings" (*TCEL* 59), Spahr insists on the universal dimension of political struggle. Similarly, Spahr's repetitions express a list-like quality even when they are not organized in conventional lists. In one such instance, she even talks about a "circular list": "I speak of the intimate relationship between salmons and humans, between humans and icebergs, between icebergs and salmons, and how this is just the beginning of the circular list" (*TCEL* 21). Spahr thereby begins circling around the issue with making lists, which

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[34] Franke (2008: 72) points out that Spahr uses the phrase "There are these things" four times in her earlier *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* (2001b). The first phrase of *TCEL* is thus already a repetition.

is that they are potentially endless. Yet there is presumably an internal limit organizing Spahr's example of a circular list, like: natural entities existing on Earth, which would include humans, salmons, and icebergs in integral connection. The difference between a linear list and a circular list is that losing a member from the circular list could prove devastating for what remains. Circular lists may thus be a useful way of imagining how larger entities like eco-systems or human communities sustain themselves. They require internal limits that organize the whole, and losing a vital member could spell destruction. By juxtaposing linear and circular lists, Spahr thereby formally enacts the difference between bad and true infinity.

Spahr's lists emphasize another dimension of true infinity because they point beyond themselves. The example of humans, salmons, and icebergs is an illuminating illustration. Even though this circular list only contains three elements in connection to each other, Spahr explicitly remarks that "this is just the beginning of the circular list" (*TCEL* 21). This implies that the reader could very well imagine other elements being included in the list. Polar bears would, for example, be a relevant addition because anthropogenic climate change directly leads to glaciers melting in the Arctic, which thereby destroys the natural habitats of polar bears. The non-exhaustive nature of Spahr's lists is likewise discernible in the list of places where protests took place. The 114 places Spahr lists are presumably those that she saw images from or read news articles about, but there were likely even more places where people protested the coming invasion of Iraq. For instance, there are no Norwegian cities mentioned in the list, but protests undoubtedly took place in Norway too. It is, in any case, possible for the reader to imagine such an incremental expansion of the list. This list is thus neither finished nor completely limitless. It is, on the contrary, truly infinite because the list is organized around an internal limit which opens the room for possible expansion beyond the 114 places already listed.

Finally, Spahr's lists formally enact her politically formalist insistence on the need to attend to both universality and singularity. On the level of content, Spahr insists that political struggle is universal because it concerns all of us. She also insists that political struggle requires attentiveness to the singularity of each living being, every*one* bringing unique glimmers into the world. Spahr highlights the glimmers of hope in the political protests. Searching for signs of hope, she "flip[s] through as many images from as many different cities as I can find on the internet. / Picture after picture, crowd after crowd. / The images differ only in the surroundings" (*TCEL* 59). In the crowds, Spahr recognizes the importance of both collective struggle and

attentiveness to each singular being. She explicitly contrasts the images of crowds with the images of the globe: "Those on the space shuttle sent back images of the calm quietness of the planet before they crashed. / Those images give the comfort of distance, a lack of detail. / These images of the protests are busy, detailed with all the glimmers of individuals" (*TCEL* 60). The protests themselves give rise to new relations: "Those who broke up suddenly discovered new lovers and their new sensualities in this glimmer despite all the burning" (*TCEL* 59). Spahr thus thoroughly rejects the promise of calmness and escape, and instead embraces the need for collective political struggle. In her lists, Spahr formally enacts the double-sided focus on universality and singularity. Her lists are formally repetitive, where one entry follows another. The lists thereby posit an equivalence between every entry. Yet at the same time, every new entry introduces a qualitative difference and adds something unique to what precedes it. To excise one segment from the list of 114 places, Athens, Thessaloniki, Budapest, Helsinki, Ankara, Kyiv, and Belgrade all share something in common—being sites of protest—but collapsing any of them into each other would erase something valuable. Each entry is therefore irreducibly different from all the others even though they all share something in common. Spahr thus repeats places of protest to insist on the universality of political struggle, but she varies the names of these places to show the specificity of each place.

Spahr's political formalism is not merely a form of protest. She also tries to imagine how to build differently. In this context, she repeatedly relates how birds build their nests. I claim that this activity is not a lament of the supposedly doomed human condition as opposed to the harmony of non-human nature. On the contrary, Spahr obsessively observes bird-singing and nest-building (*TCEL* 15-18; 20; 49; 65-69) to search for inspiration about how humans might creatively build better. In my view, this recurring motif indicates Spahr's ecologically-oriented attention to the constructedness of forms.

In his *Philosophy of Nature* (2004: 406-409), Hegel writes about "the constructive instinct" of animals, which he explicitly connects to the artistic impulse: "The first form of the artistic impulse […] is the instinctive building of nests, lairs, shelters in order to make the general totality of the animal's environment" (*PN* 407). This artistic impulse is exhibited by bird-song because their "voice is not a mere declaration of a need, no mere cry; on the contrary, bird-song is the disinterested utterance whose ultimate determination is the immediate enjoyment of self" (*PN* 409). Setting aside whether Hegel's claims are empirically correct, he

makes a profoundly politically formalist point that connects limits, artistic creation, and built forms: "In the constructive instinct the creature has produced itself as an outer existence and yet remains the same immediate creature; here, then, it first attains to self-enjoyment, to the specific feeling of self" (*PN* 409).[35] This is a fundamental politically formalist insight which informs my reading of Spahr's ecopoetry. The converse of Skinner's above-cited minimal definition of ecopoetry as a "house making" is, moreover, provided by Hegel's point, related by Kornbluh, that architecture "is the first art, not only etymologically (*arche-tekne*), but because it limns the distinction between function and symbolism, between necessity and freedom" (Kornbluh 2019: 41).[36] Building social forms of living is therefore an ecopoetic activity both as a practical and creative endeavor.

Although activities like bird-watching may function as a (sometimes healthy) distraction from the conflict-ridden field of politics, Spahr views such an escapist fantasy as impossible and undesirable. The birds are always already implicated in Spahr's everyday life: "Each morning we wait in our bed listening for the parrots and their chattering" (*TCEL* 15). This implies not only that the birds infuse Spahr's thoughts about love (*TCEL* 15) but equally her thoughts of war: "But we wake up and all we hear in the birds' songs is war" (*TCEL* 68). If the goal of Spahr's poetry were to escape from political forms, she might have been a nature poet rather than an ecopoet. Recalling the above-cited interview with Jenna Goldsmith, Spahr explicitly critiques poetry which is "a celebration of the natural world in a lyric form that frequently presumes that humans are not a part of it (often this is the tradition that gets called nature poetry" (Goldsmith and Spahr 2016: 413). Spahr does not romanticize nature. She shows that nature is not external to human societies but an internal limit which we must acknowledge. This is why a reconceived relation to nature requires reckoning with how our social forms are organized. The climate crisis is a consequence of specific forms of collective self-organization that are allergic to finitude. To recall McGowan's claim in *Capitalism and Desire*, to understand nature as an internal limit rather than an external barrier requires a rejection of the fantasy of endless progress. Thus conceived, the unpredictability of nature would function as an internal

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[35] See Hägglund (2019: 403n6) for a gloss on Hegel's passage.

[36] See Hegel's *Aesthetics,* vols. 1 and 2 (*A1* 83-84; *A2* 630-700).

limit, around which "social production would orient itself […] without any possibility of ever transcending it" (McGowan 2016: 148).

My claim is that Spahr's evocation of nest-building (politics) and bird-singing (art) indicates the importance of political formalism and ecopoetry for our contemporary moment. Early on, Spahr admits that her talk of parrots is not disconnected from the rest of her life but intimately implicated. Having called her own home a roost, Spahr subsequently calls attention to "those who encourage us to think of [the parrots] as roosting with us" (*TCEL* 17). Bogged down by "the three-legged stool of political pieces, military piece, and development piece," Spahr mentions the migratory nature of "the parrots [who] have entered into their habitat far away from their origin" (*TCEL* 18). Living on Hawai'i while writing, Spahr mentions the parrots' search for fruits and seeds from plants "that were, like them, like us, brought here from somewhere else" (*TCEL* 17). Near the end of the book, Spahr observes "the mynas gathering materials for their nests," and their creative use of "a big clump of dried grass" and "a big piece of napkin" (*TCEL* 65) as materials for their homes. In the same section, the phrase "birds and their bowers and their habits of nest" occurs twice (*TCEL* 66; 67). Spahr's conversations with her beloveds about the nests are infused with intrusive thoughts of war, leaving bird-watching far from an escape from politics. That Spahr explicitly connects nests and politics indicates the importance of political forms for her ecopoetry. She may originally have tried observing the parrots as an escapist distraction, yet this activity animates her own politically formalist ecopoetry. In this context, it is worth recalling Marx's point that "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax" (Marx 1982: 284). Birds are unable to abstract from their concrete givens and thus cannot imagine how to build differently. This is, however, something which we can do.

3 Amitav Ghosh's Politically Formalist Ecofiction

3.1 Introduction

By reading Amitav Ghosh's ecofiction, this chapter highlights different dimensions of political formalism than the preceding chapter on Spahr's ecopoetry. *The Hungry Tide* develops the practical component of the truly infinite project of building and sustaining social forms. I begin by discussing the ecopolitical relevance of Amitav Ghosh's work in general, primarily drawing on his own scholarly work on environmental issues. The most crucial texts are *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) and *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), in addition to a few shorter pieces compiled in *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (2005). These texts inform my reading of Ghosh insofar as they indicate his interest in ecopolitics. In the remainder of this section, I examine why Ghosh sees fiction as a useful medium to illuminate the ecopolitical issues with which his work is concerned.

The rest of this chapter, devoted to my reading of *The Hungry Tide*, is divided in a threefold manner. First, I examine the human-animal relation in the Sundarbans region as Ghosh depicts it in the novel. In this context, I draw on the work of anthropologist Annu Jalais. Ghosh's novelistic representation of the human-animal relation calls attention to the issue of spatial finitude that became precarious during the Morichjhãpi[37] massacre, when thousands of Dalit refugees were killed for allegedly occupying an area designated for preserving Bengal tigers. I argue that *The Hungry Tide* presents spatial finitude not as a lamentable fact of life but as the condition of possibility for sharing the limited surface of local environments. Second, I examine how the novel thematizes language not solely as a barrier separating finite beings from each other but equally as a starting point for interpersonal and cross-cultural forms of mediation. Precisely because it depends upon certain rules and conventions, or finite but inherent limits, language is generative and hence truly infinite in its creative potential. The third and final section is the most significant one for my overall argument concerning true infinity and political formalism. In this section, I trace the two main forms of politics represented in *The Hungry*

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[37] There are several possible transliterations of the name of this island. In accordance with Ghosh's preferred alternative in *The Hungry Tide*, I call the island "Morichjhãpi."

Tide: Sir Daniel Hamilton's utopian project and Nilima's BDT. Whereas Hamilton wanted to teach the islanders how to build cooperatives that could serve as a model for Indian independence, Nilima simply sought to make life bearable for the widows of deceased fishermen. Nirmal, Nilima's husband, wishes to maintain an idealized legacy of Hamilton's utopian project, yet this prevents him from ascertaining the small but vital changes which Nilima's project makes for the lives of those whom it affects. Despite its rudimentary form, I argue that Nilima's project embodies the politically formalist ethos and hence indicates the minimal coordinates by which a truly infinite form of ecopolitics must abide. Instead of lamenting the impossibility of potentially helping everyone everywhere all at once, Nilima affirms this internal limit as constitutive for her project of actually helping the inhabitants of Lusibari. This is a project which requires collective effort to be sustained over time.

The criticism on *The Hungry Tide* is vast, so I will limit my overview to contributions which are directly relevant for my own intervention. In general, the criticism on the novel is divided into three main areas of focus, with significant overlaps: 1) politics, including the massacre, the critique of conservationism, and Hamilton's project, 2) environmental issues, like the human-tiger relation, but also the role of crabs, dolphins, and other animals in the Sundarbans, and 3) the novel's formal elements. There is a strong overlap between 1 and 2 (environmental justice),[38] and 2 and 3 (literary form and the environment) respectively, but to my knowledge, there is a gap in the secondary criticism trying to connect all three areas. This is the gap I aim to fill with my reading of Ghosh's novel. The most productive way of doing so, I argue, is to connect literary and political form in a time of ecological crisis.

Multiple scholars have offered original accounts of *The Hungry Tide*'s mediation of form, yet to my knowledge nobody has thus far attempted to connect the issue of literary and political forms explicitly. Jens Martin Gurr, for instance, appropriately critiques the tendency in ecocriticism to elide the issue of literary form (Gurr 2010: 70-72). His brief way of suggesting

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[38] Some contributions focusing on the massacre and/or multispecies relationality include Rajender Kaur (2007), Evelyne Hanquart-Turner (2011), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2015), Ursula K. Heise (2016), and Nicola Pilia (2020). The issue of spatial finitude is, in my view, implicit in both the novel itself and most secondary criticism focusing on environmental (in)justice in the novel. In section 3.3, I seek to make explicit the environmental issue of spatial finitude.

how to rectify ecocriticism's formal deficit is to "emplot an ecosystem," which involves examining "how key geological, climatic, and environmental characteristics of a given ecosystem appear as a structuring principle of the text" (Gurr 2010: 70). To that end, Gurr argues that *The Hungry Tide* emplots the tension between land and water, based on the novel being divided into two parts, titled "Ebb" and "Flood" respectively (Gurr 2010: 75). Referring to several passages where the landscape is compared to a text, Gurr insists that "landscape and language are not only analogous but that language shapes landscape just as landscape shapes language. In a sense, landscape appears as sedimented language and language as liquefied landscape" (Gurr 2010: 78). Gurr's narratological approach is productive for articulating the question of literary form, yet my approach differs significantly because I seek to connect the study of literary form with ecocriticism in an explicitly political reading of *The Hungry Tide*. Such a political reading is formalist in Kornbluh's sense, where form is neither incidental nor supplementary to content but the key concern for political readings of literature.

My approach may likewise be contrasted with that indicated by Roman Bartosch's (2013) extensive narratological analysis of *The Hungry Tide*. I fully support his suggestion that "it is time for ecocritics *as literary scholars* to move away from the idea of scientific ecology and orient themselves towards the aesthetic potential of literature instead" (Bartosch 2013: 91). Literature is a formal way of mediating human experience, one which necessarily molds its content in specific ways to highlight different aspects of the world. Bartosch's analysis builds on Gurr's approach by offering a narratological analysis that relates the formal conundrum noted by Gurr to the postcolonial version of ecocriticism (Bartosch 2013: 88). Bartosch explains the efficacy of literature as follows: "The text does not simply attest to what is already known: it opens up new ways of seeing" (Bartosch 2013: 107). Conversely, I will argue that *The Hungry Tide*, as an exemplary politically formalist text, opens up new ways of building.

Pheng Cheah offers a reading of the novel in terms of literature's formal capacity of "worlding," which is visible in the legend of Bon Bibi (Cheah 2016: 258), a legend which meaningfully narrates the relationships between humans and tigers. Cheah moreover insists on the novel's formal mediation of actual historical events, primarily via temporal juxtaposition. As such, Ghosh is not merely interested in circulating his novel among a global reading public, but more importantly, Ghosh "hopes that *The Hungry Tide* will aid in reworlding the Sundarbans" (Cheah 2016: 250). I briefly explore the efficacy of literature in chapter 4.

Brandon Jones claims that despite being written before the term "Anthropocene" became popularized, *The Hungry Tide* is an exemplar of Anthropocene fiction. More specifically, he points out that Ghosh's novel offers valuable resources for articulating possible responses to climate-induced migration. Highlighting the difficulties of visualizing climate change, Jones asserts that fiction "can function as a representational device that mediates our knowledge of phenomena that exceed the scale of immediate experience" (Jones 2018: 645). Such an assertion evinces Jones's insistence on literary form, which he explores through the novel's mediation of geological deep time and our own embodied perceptual apparatus.

One final formalist approach to the question of realism in contemporary ecofiction is offered by Debjani Ganguly. She argues that the realist novel has recently mutated and now embodies "planetary realism." While emphasizing that *The Hungry Tide* does not explicitly thematize climate change or the Anthropocene, Ganguly insists that "Ghosh's novel prefigures this shift [in the public's imagination] and works formally at the cusp of this transition in global environmental consciousness" (Ganguly 2020: 442). Hence, *The Hungry Tide* fulfills all three main criteria for planetary realism: 1) it represents the local environment not just as inert and passive but equally as an actant; 2) it critiques and displaces human exceptionalism while accurately representing multispecies relationality; and 3) it weaves together "mythographic and geological time with the historical and the contemporary" (Ganguly: 444; 446; 447). Although I agree with Ganguly's general assessment that *The Hungry Tide* is timely even a couple decades after its publication, I do not directly address these questions since my focus lies elsewhere. Specifically, I emphasize the novel's insistence on the need to imagine new forms of building which are more suitable to our time of planetary ecological crisis.

3.2 Ghosh's Non-Fiction

Both as a novelist and scholar, Ghosh has drawn the public's attention to environmental issues for multiple decades. His books are heavily informed by his educational background as a social anthropologist and from working as a journalist for several years.[39] His two acclaimed scholarly

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[39] Most of the texts compiled in *Incendiary Circumstances* stem from Ghosh's time as a journalist.

books on environmental issues, *The Great Derangement* and *The Nutmeg's Curse*, are frequent points of reference in ecocriticism for their scholarly merit, regardless of Ghosh's novelistic practice. In this section, I refer to what I deem to be his most significant contributions of non-fiction for apprehending our current critical climatic predicament. In addition to the two books, I draw on a couple of shorter texts, "The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of My Grandfather's Bookcase" (1998) and "The Town by the Sea" (2005), both included in *Incendiary Circumstances*. I conclude this section by indicating how Ghosh situates his own novelistic practice relative to contemporary environmental debates.

A relatively early text, "The Town by the Sea," indicates Ghosh's interest in the relation between finitude and political forms. He wrote the piece in the wake of the 2004 Boxing Day earthquake and subsequent tsunami in the Indian Ocean, one of the most devastating natural disasters in recorded human history. Ghosh reflects on the tsunami's indiscriminate destruction of human habitation: "The tsunami, in the suddenness of its onslaught allowed for no preparations. Not only did it destroy the survivors' homes and decimate their families; it also robbed them of all the evidentiary traces of their place in the world" (Ghosh 2005: 2-3). The destruction caused by the tsunami testifies to the finitude and transitoriness of human life and forms of living. Ghosh insists, however, that this is not a good reason to abandon projects of rebuilding. It is noteworthy that he brings up the potentially limitless amounts of relief that could be offered to those affected: "Sufficiency is not a concept that is applicable here; potentially there is no limit to the amount of relief that can be used" (Ghosh 2005: 8). Forms of relief cannot be sufficient because whatever finite amount of money or resources are given, the amount cannot make up for the irreplaceable lives lost or permanently damaged.

Building on Ghosh's point, I would argue that this limit should not be seen as a constraint preventing us from doing anything. Rather, it shows that the very concept of finitude, or sufficiency in this context, is inadequate if it is interpreted as a lack of being. The experience of devastating loss is always a possibility for living beings, but following Hägglund's argument in *This Life*, it is only due to the always-present possibility of loss that we can value anything at all. True infinity, as theorized by Hegel, is self-relation through otherness. It relies on finitude as a positive condition of possibility for everything while simultaneously recognizing that finitude exposes us to the possibility of tragic loss. Consequently, the efforts of rebuilding what is destroyed by natural disasters are truly infinite projects because the very activity of rebuilding

makes a real difference for those affected. The end sought is not located in an unattainable absolute fulfillment but is continually reached in the process of rebuilding. The connection between finitude and social forms in need of rebuilding is a crucial point which animates my interpretation of Nilima's BDT in *The Hungry Tide*.

Ghosh explores a different dimension of environmental finitude in one of his recent works, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, where he briefly discusses the metaphor of "exhausting" our planet's natural resources. His discussion neatly elucidates the problem with the mode of relating to finitude that follows the logic of bad infinity. There are two aspects of the exhaustion metaphor that are worth distinguishing between: 1) the Earth's finite natural resources being exhausted and 2) the exhaustion of our imagination. The first implies viewing the Earth as a container of a limited number of resources to be extracted and potentially exhausted in the process.[40] This mode of relating to finitude informs the logic of capital accumulation for the sake of future profit, an inherently limitless drive invested in the promise of a future which structurally cannot arrive. The second aspect is a direct consequence of the first. If the Earth is rendered entirely finite and susceptible to complete demystification, no room is left for meaning or imagination that exceeds what is given. "Once conquest is achieved," Ghosh explains, "the conquered object gives the impression of being supine and inert. Having succumbed to mastery, it holds no more mysteries; the challenge it once posed to the conqueror's imagination is exhausted" (Ghosh 2021: 76). Ghosh elaborates on what this loss of meaning entails: "the Earth can no longer ennoble, nor delight, nor produce new aspirations. All it can inspire in its would-be conqueror's mind is the kind of contempt that arises from familiarity" (Ghosh 2021: 77). Ghosh's poignant articulation of this metaphor indicates the constructive role of literature's potential for defamiliarizing. If reading is a truly infinite activity, as I claim, then it can make explicit how life is truly infinite not despite, but because of, our shared constitutive finitude.

[40] Arne Johan Vetlesen's term "resourcism" is an apt description of this view. Commenting on how it animates the ideology of sustainable development, he argues that resourcism is "exercise in denial, conveniently avoiding the growth- and profit-based capitalist roots of the problem, defusing the conflict between growth and environment by turning it into a managerial exercise that instills in people at large a vague sense that the problem is being taken care of" (Vetlesen 2015: 12).

A related aspect of regarding finitude as exhaustive of earthly life is the one-sided scientific focus on climate change, which Ghosh claims is potentially detrimental for enacting a proper political response to our current crisis. It goes without saying that he is not denying the merits of scientific explanations of natural phenomena, and he would undoubtedly dismiss the flawed pseudo-arguments presented by deniers of the anthropogenic nature of climate change. Ghosh's point is that the "techno-economic framing" has led to "the subject of climate change [becoming] enclosed within a vast palisade of scientific and academic expertise" (Ghosh 2021: 148). As a result, "the phenomenon of climate change and the research that surrounds it have come to be almost totally identified with each other" (Ghosh 2021: 148).[41] Climate research is a necessary precondition for apprehending how our activities in the world may have detrimental effects. Yet scientific explanations do not themselves say anything concrete about how, or even why, we should try to reverse or mitigate such processes. Those are political decisions which must be collectively decided, enacted, and sustained over time. In fact, climate science is so concerned with future predictions and projections that one could be led to believe that climate change is a problem located in the future, as noted by Ghosh. The reason is that the focus on long-term projections "reinforces a perception that abstracts climate change from the past and projects it in the opposite direction, toward the future. This perception has come to color most of the thinking that goes into climate change, especially in the West: no matter whether in economics, or law, or indeed fiction, global warming is almost always imagined in relation to the future" (Ghosh 2021: 152). The only time for collective action, the present, has been devalued in comparison.

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[41] Cf. Malm's (2016) critique of the term "Anthropocene" being adopted as an analytic category for comprehending climate change: "Insofar as it occludes the historical origins of global warming and sinks the fossil economy into unalterable conditions, 'the Anthropocene' is an ideology more by default than by design, [a] product of the dominance of natural science in the field of climate change […]. It is one of several theoretical frameworks which happen to be not only profoundly defective, but also inimical to action. 'The Anthropocene' might be a useful concept and narrative for polar bears and amphibians and birds who want to know what species is wreaking such terrible havoc on their habitats, but alas, they lack the capacity to scrutinize and stand up to human actions; for those who may do so – other humans – species-thinking on climate change conduces to paralysis" (Malm 2016: 272).

Concerning this temporal dimension, Ghosh points out that the idea of terraforming is not merely science fiction; it is a historical process which has already taken place on Earth. Ghosh suggests that terraforming is not simply the process of making other planets habitable for earthlings. Rather than being a general category of making new areas habitable, terraforming is, according to Ghosh, a particular way of forming habitats which is extrapolated from colonial history. The only difference is that terraforming "extends the project of creating neo-Europes into one of creating neo-Earths" (Ghosh 2021: 54). Hence, Ghosh observes how the rhetoric of terraforming is imperial since extraterrestrial space is viewed "as a 'frontier' to be 'conquered' and 'colonized'" (Ghosh 2021: 54), evinced by the popularity of the term "space colonization." Finally, he argues that the rhetoric's colonial origin is a primary reason why ideas of space colonization and terraforming appear so appealing to "the English-speaking world, not just among fans of science fiction, but also among tech billionaires, entrepreneurs, engineers, and so on. It suggests an almost poignant yearning to repeat an ancestral experience of colonizing and subjugating not just other humans, but also planetary environments" (Ghosh 2021: 54).

Regardless of whether any advocates of space colonization would confess to holding such a position, I believe Ghosh correctly identifies the underlying logic of how the dream of space colonization functions in our current moment in history. It is far from coincidental that techno-capitalist billionaires like Bezos and Musk are among the most prominent figures advocating for space colonization. However, it is crucial to avoid outright rejecting all efforts of exploring space as inherently detrimental to human and non-human life on Earth and possibly elsewhere. The philosophical issue is the underlying logic of bad infinity that informs the idea of colonizing an infinitely open frontier. Limitless expansion is problematic for two reasons. First, it misrecognizes nature as an external barrier rather than as an internal limit. Second, it disregards the needs of the present in favor of a promised future which never arrives. This is why we need to reconceive infinity as true infinity, which is a radically different way of relating to our own ineradicable and constitutive finitude as living beings.

In our current historical moment of planetary ecological crisis, Ghosh regards fiction as vital, even if it has not yet lived up to the task. In the most-cited passage from *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh claims that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 2016: 9). He finds it symptomatic that many contemporary novelists struggle to write about the climate crisis in their fiction, despite the authors themselves being

personally concerned about these issues. As a result, "when novelists do choose to write about climate change it is almost always outside of fiction," and he mentions Arundhati Roy and Paul Kingsnorth as examples of this tendency (Ghosh 2016: 8). According to Ghosh a proper imaginative reorientation of the planetary ecological crisis is sorely needed. In my reading of *The Hungry Tide*, I argue that the novel serves such a role of reorienting our understanding of what I deem to be the underlying philosophical dimension of our current crisis: our relation to finitude.[42] Suhasini Vincent observes that "Ghosh creates texts that conjure up worlds that become real precisely because of their finitude and distinctiveness" (Vincent 2018: 13). I agree with this suggestion, but I develop it in a way which would likely differ from Vincent's own analysis if this claim were developed further. I argue that *The Hungry Tide* affirms the constitutive and constructive role of finitude for any politically formalist projects of building forms that sustain lives.

A crucial point of contention in ecocriticism is the question of literary realism, especially whether a mimetic approach to reality is sufficient for ecofiction. That the crucial aspect of literary realism is mimetic imitation seems to inform Ghosh's own account, in *The Great Derangement*, of the realist novel's failure to apprehend anthropogenic climate change. This failure, Ghosh (2016: 15-17; 23-24) claims, stems from realism's formal investment in probability and the need to relate narrative events in a believable manner. This investment leaves realist novels incapable of adequately representing a historical state of climatical exception borne by anthropogenic global warming. As support for his claim, Ghosh draws on Franco Moretti's theorization of "fillers." Due to its formal insistence on probability, "the novel [was] midwifed into existence around the world, through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday" (Ghosh 2016: 17). Because of the elevated role probability plays

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[42] Jones makes a similar but more specific observation concerning the relevance of Ghosh's novel for our current moment, particularly for the issue of climate-induced migration: "given the geological lens of deep time that leads to Nirmal's prognostication about the future impact of sea level rise on the Sundarbans as well as the unexpected cyclone that wreaks havoc at the end of the novel, foreshadowing the climate-induced extreme weather events that are sure to become more frequent in the region, it can be said that *The Hungry Tide* evokes the contemporary crisis of climate refugees in South Asia as a situation in urgent need of precisely this kind of utopian vision" (Jones 2018: 648).

in the modern novel, this literary form, "unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning. It is this that makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel" (Ghosh 2016: 17). The modern novel's formal investment in the schema of probability has left it incapable of adequately representing "climate change and the unthinkable," the subtitle of *The Great Derangement*. My claim, however, is that Ghosh's own novel, *The Hungry Tide*, provides resources for articulating a proper political response to the planetary ecological crisis. Those resources can be excavated from Nilima's politically formalist affirmation of finitude as a condition of possibility for social life.

Because a realist novel must be set somewhere, it can render environmental degradation visible by imagining the loss of place. If a place like the Sundarbans could subsist independently of the passing of time, there would be no reason to care about it. A place which never changes and cannot be destroyed is devoid of meaning. Time and space co-constitute the novel as a literary form, and to acknowledge the finitude of both time and space is essential for apprehending the planetary ecological crisis. In a similar vein, Ghosh writes on the transnational origins of the novel as a literary form and remarks that "the paradox of the novel as a form is that it is founded upon a myth of parochialism, in the exact sense of a parish—a place named and charted, a definite location" (Ghosh 2005: 110). Despite the form being influenced by creative flows from different literary traditions and places around the globe, a given novel usually requires a "setting, and within the evolution of the narrative this setting must, classically, play a part almost as important as those of the characters themselves" (Ghosh 2005: 110). *The Hungry Tide* clearly draws on this legacy, as indicated by the numerous analyses devoted to the role of place in the novel, not merely as a setting but equally as a dynamic agent.[43] Later in the same essay, Ghosh explains the conundrum of writing about a place one knows personally. He observes that "to locate oneself through prose, one must begin with an act of dislocation" (Ghosh 2005: 119). Revealingly, Ghosh argues that even though we, as readers of novels, imagine that we experience a given "sense of place" through the act of reading, "the

[43] For analyses of place in the novel, see, for instance: Weik (2006), Anand (2008), Rath and Malshe (2010), Fletcher (2011), Roy (2018), Vincent (2018), Filipova (2021), and Woltmann (2021).

truth is that it is the very loss of a lived sense of place that makes their fictional representation possible" (Ghosh 2005: 119). Insofar as a "sense of place" necessarily includes the ever-present possibility of loss, Ghosh here highlights the transitory nature of more-than-human life.

In my analysis of *The Hungry Tide*, I argue that Ghosh uses this foregrounding of a delimited place to indicate what is at stake in the crucial ecocritical question of finitude. Being formally constrained to place a novel somewhere and not elsewhere does not prevent novels like *The Hungry Tide* from representing the more-than-local consequences of how characters act and engage with others in their given fictional space and place. I show this by following Kornbluh's suggestion that literary realism does not consist in a mimetic representation of the already-existing world, as is usually held, but that realist novels enact politically formalist models of possible worlds. Reading *The Hungry Tide* as a politically formalist text thus opens new horizons for reading contemporary ecopolitical novels.

3.3 Spatial Finitude: Humans and Other Animals

For large parts of Ghosh's audience, the Sundarbans is primarily known for its mangrove forests being home to the Bengal tiger. Anthropologist Annu Jalais is an important scholar writing on the relation between humans and tigers in the region.[44] Indeed, her book *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*, originally published in 2009,[45] "should," according to Cheah, "be regarded as a requisite companion volume to Ghosh's novel because it provides a deeper social scientific and cultural analysis of the context needed for a more adequate reading of the novel" (Cheah 2016: 362n26). In the book, largely based on accounts given by the Sundarbans islanders, Jalais offers a detailed analysis of life in the region. Concerning tigers, she outlines the two predominant "representations of [Bengal] tigers in recent history, one colonial and the other national." By calling attention to these representations, Jalais shows "how representations, even of wild animals, are ultimately linked to power" (Jalais 2011: 9). The "cosmopolitan" tiger is associated with wildlife conservation agencies like the

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[44] Jalais and Ghosh traveled together in the Sundarbans. While Jalais conducted fieldwork for her PhD, Ghosh did research for *The Hungry Tide* (*HT* 331-332; Jalais 2011: x).

[45] The book draws on several of her earlier publications (Jalais 2005; 2007; 2008).

World Wildlife Foundation and Project Tiger (initiated in 1973). The islanders, by contrast, view tigers via the legend of Bon Bibi, parts of which are presented in *The Hungry Tide*. Forest fishers in the region believe, Jalais relates, that humans and tigers are not necessarily pitted against each other for natural reasons. On the contrary, the fishers regard themselves as bound to tigers for three main reasons: "because they have the same symbolic mother in Bonbibi, because they divide the forest products between themselves and tigers, and because ultimately they share the same harsh environment, which turns them all into irritable beings" (Jalais 2011: 74). This indicates that the islanders see the spatial finitude of the Sundarbans not as an external barrier, forcing them to hunt and kill tigers, but as an internal limit for coinhabiting a precarious environment with other animals, though not always harmoniously.

Jalais offers a detailed discussion of the scientific debates about why Bengal tigers are prone to eating human flesh. One prominent theory suggests that the "increasing brackishness of the rivers" causes the tigers "to depend on the 'sweetness' of human blood to obtain a certain dietary balance." A different theory is that "the tide washes away the boundaries of the territory that the tiger marks with its urine," while yet another is that the tigers' aggressivity stems from the fact that "they have to keep swimming for hours to stay afloat when the tide is in" (Jalais 2011: 13-14). These explanations offered by scientists differ, however, from what the islanders believe. According to Jalais, they explain that the tigers were originally relatively at ease with the human populations in the area because, like many humans inhabiting the region, the tigers were migrants, fleeing primarily from Java and Bali (Jalais 2011: 146). The islanders believe the main reason that tigers gained an increased appetite for human flesh is the Morichjhãpi massacre, the events of which I briefly recount in the following paragraph. According to Jalais's conversations with the islanders, they "explained that tigers, annoyed at the disturbances caused by the violence unleashed in the forest had started attacking people and that this was how they ended up getting a taste for human flesh. Others argued that it was the corpses of killed refugees that had floated through the forest that had given them the taste" (Jalais 2011: 171).

The Morichjhãpi massacre took place because the West Bengal government deemed the Dalit (or casteless) refugees' settlement on Morichjhãpi to conflict with the Bengal tigers' right of conservation. Having been urged by the West Bengal Left Front Minister at the time, Ram Chatterjee, to settle in the Sundarbans region, thousands of Dalit refugee families fled from refugee camps in Dandakaranya to the island of Morichjhãpi (Mallick 1999: 107). In their short

time on the island, the refugees established a relatively well-functioning community, building "makeshift huts along the cultivated area of the island" and sustaining themselves "by working as crab and fish collectors in the forest, and with the help of the islanders, by selling their products in the nearby villages" (Jalais 2011: 166). Unbeknownst to the refugees, however, the surrounding area had been classified as an area of preservation for the Bengal tiger a few years prior to their settlement on the island, as part of Project Tiger. Ross Mallick explains that "the state government was not disposed to tolerate such settlement, stating that the refugees were 'in unauthorised occupation of Marichjhapi which is a part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Acts'" (Mallick 1999: 107).[46] Failing to convince the settlers to leave the island, "the West Bengal government started on January 26, 1979, an economic blockade of the settlement with thirty police launches. The community was tear-gassed, huts were razed, and fisheries and tube wells were destroyed, in an attempt to deprive refugees of food and water" (Mallick 1999: 107-108). These interventions did not resolve the situation but instead escalated the tensions. The West Bengal government consequently demanded an eviction by force, which was enacted on 14-16 May 1979. Because the West Bengal government has denied both the reality and brutality of the incident, no official death toll remains. However, Mallick (1999: 111; 114) notes that most estimates indicate the final death toll during the massacre to exceed 17,000 people or more than 4,000 families. These numbers include those who were murdered, those who died from starvation in the months during the food blockade, and those who died in transit away from Morichjhãpi. Jalais observes that the islanders view the massacre as "a betrayal – as much by the state, the forest officials and city dwellers, as by tigers" (Jalais 2011: 164).

In *The Hungry Tide*, the tiger-killing scene encapsulates the tension between the cosmopolitan and local views of tigers. A tiger has become trapped inside a village hut. In the

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[46] Both Divya Anand (2008) and Omendra Kumar Singh (2011) claim that the government's disapproval stemmed from other factors, and that the ecological appeal was merely a pretext, since Morichjhãpi was "not part of the core area of the tiger reserve" (Anand 2008: 31). Anand argues that "[t]he primary motive […] was to pre-empt the economic drain on the state" (Anand 2008: 31), whereas Singh argues that the West Bengal government viewed the Dalit settlers as secessionists, and thus saw them as a threat to the nationalist narrative of Indian unity (Singh 2011: 250).

past, this tiger has killed two people and preyed on the village's livestock (*HT* 241). Seizing the opportunity, the villagers begin stabbing the trapped animal, and they later set the entire hut on fire. Piya, the cetologist who has arrived in the region to study local dolphins, witnesses this event as an outsider and her immediate reaction is shock: "the scene was so incomprehensible and yet so vivid that it was only now she understood that it was the incapacitated animal that was being attacked with the sharpened staves" (*HT* 241). Being a conscientious cosmopolitan conservationist, Piya regards tigers as vulnerable animals in need of protection. Her horror is amplified when she realizes that Fokir, a local fisherman whom Piya befriends, does nothing to stop the angry mob but instead participates in it (*HT* 243). Kanai is the owner of a business translation agency who comes to the Sundarbans to retrieve a notebook left by his deceased uncle, Nirmal. Kanai serves as an interpreter between Piya and Fokir, and during the tiger-killing scene, he explains that Fokir is telling Piya that she "shouldn't be so upset." Although Piya retorts that "a tiger set on fire" is "the most horrifying thing I've ever seen," Fokir explains that a tiger only enters a village "because it wants to die" (*HT* 244). Because her previous relationship to tigers is primarily based on the images propagated by environmental agencies and organizations, Piya cannot but fail to recognize what is taking place in front of her eyes.

Piya's reaction to this incident bespeaks the uneven distribution of compassion inherent in some forms of conservationism. This becomes clear during a conversation between Piya and Kanai the day after the incident. Before this conversation, Piya's understanding of the tiger-killing remains largely unchanged. She does not consider that the villagers may have had good reasons for killing the animal, though perhaps not for the excessive use of force. Instead, Piya remarks that the incident "was like something from some other time – before recorded history" (*HT* 248). She does not use the words herself, but Piya may just as well have called the villagers "uncivilized savages" for their actions. This prompts Kanai to reiterate how thousands of people have been killed by tigers over the years, but that this predicament has been ignored. "If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth," Kanai explains, "it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers" (*HT* 248). The poor people of the Sundarbans are thus seen as too poor to matter. Kanai understandably laments a predicament in which "we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings" (*HT* 248). During the conversation, Piya does not

concede that her pre-judgments about the human-tiger relation were distorted, yet at the end of the novel, she seems to have taken Kanai's sentiment to heart.

Apart from the tiger-killing scene, Ghosh repeatedly evokes the widespread fear of tigers among the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. He conveys this fear by highlighting the taboo of imitating tigers or uttering the Bengali word for tiger, *bāgh* (*HT* 82; 90; 127). For instance, Kusum tells Kanai that the word is taboo because "to say it is to call it" (*HT* 90). She makes this comment while recounting the story of how her father was killed by a tiger (*HT* 89-91). A tiger had spotted her father's boat, but Kusum's yelling had no effect because of the wind. Along with the others on the shore, Kusum watched her own father being mauled to death by the tiger. This is one reason why Kanai's subsequent encounter with a tiger on Garjontola is a distressing experience for him. Another is that Nilima tells him that "I've lived here for over fifty years and I've never seen a tiger. Nor do I want to. I've come to believe what people say in these parts: that if you see a tiger, the chances are you won't live to tell the tale" (*HT* 201).

The Bon Bibi legend is not an example of superstition on behalf of the islanders but functions as a strategy through which they can make their precarious lives meaningful. Their ceremonies dedicated to the "glory of Bon Bibi" (*HT* 83-92) indicate how the islanders affirm their constitutive finitude and social life together with more-than-human animals in the region. The islanders would not have put it this way, but the novel shows how their religious practice embodies what Hägglund calls secular faith. Living near potentially deadly tigers, the islanders acknowledge that their lives are often at risk. They consequently take this into account in their social forms of life. Unlike Nirmal, who pines for an otherworldly post-revolutionary beyond, the islanders are committed to making this life meaningful. Their exposure to the ever-present possibility of being killed animates their efforts to make their lives together meaningful.

A final point worth making is that Fokir's lack of mobility outside of the Sundarbans is a precondition for his unique practical knowledge about the region. Because Fokir, unlike Piya and Kanai, cannot easily travel away from the Sundarbans, his spatial mobility is restricted. Yet because he has spent so much time in the region, he has acquired valuable forms of knowledge which would be significantly more difficult for someone like Piya to attain. For instance, he has an intimate understanding of what it means to live in this precarious environment where he is often exposed to deadly tigers. By virtue of being a fisherman, Fokir possesses specialized knowledge about crabs, not as objects of scientific inquiry but as living beings partaking in a

local environment. Fokir's lived experience and practical know-how cannot be replaced. Even though aspects of his knowledge are incorporated into Piya's project at the end of the novel because the GPS tracked their boat's movement (*HT* 328), Fokir's practical knowledge is irretrievably lost. Information about the specific routes is finite, whereas Fokir's practical knowledge is truly infinite and irreplaceable.

This does not mean that Piya's act of incorporating information attained with Fokir's help and naming her project after him (*HT* 328) should be taken as an act of appropriating the subaltern. On the contrary, it shows that Fokir's death was not in vain. While they are out on a boat trip to track the movements of dolphins (*HT* 280-281), a storm is brewing. Fokir and Piya realize that they will not make it back in time, and they try to survive by clinging onto a tree trunk (*HT* 312). Fokir shields Piya with his body, and when the storm's eye arrives, Piya notices other animals, such as "a flock of white birds" that had "been trying to stay within the storm's eye." In fact, Piya picks up one of them, noticing that "it was trembling and she could feel the fluttering of its heart" (*HT* 320). Even one of the potentially deadly tigers is spotted by Fokir, as it is "pulling itself out of the water and into a tree on the tree on the far side of the island. It seemed to have been following the storm's eyes, like the birds, resting whenever it could" (*HT* 321). This is the clearest example in the novel of the shared corporeal vulnerability of the more-than-human animals inhabiting the Sundarbans, all of whom are exposed to potentially lethal cyclones. Fokir dies while sacrificing himself to save Piya's life. Although some critics have found this part of the novel problematic, it is worth noting that once they were too far gone to make it back before the storm, the alternative would likely have been the death of both. Fokir's practical knowledge about this local environment is what saves Piya's life in the end. One factor why Fokir sacrifices himself might be that the scientific knowledge Piya possesses has traditionally been viewed as more valuable than the concrete and practical knowledge Fokir possesses. Be that as it may, the novel's ending suggests that Piya no longer romanticizes Fokir's status as a "noble savage." She instead seeks to commemorate his life.

3.4 Mediating the Borders of Language

Language exemplifies, both as a system and as a means of communication, how internal limits are not thwarting barriers but constitutive for creative freedom. The rules of a given language certainly limit possibilities, but insofar as language is generative, the rules simultaneously give rise to creativity. This structural dimension of language, interesting as it may be, is not the primary focus of my discussion. Language is nonetheless a crucial thematic focus in Ghosh's novel. According to Anupama Mohan, *The Hungry Tide*, "[m]ore than any other work by Ghosh, […] is about writing and textuality and draws attention to the ways in which language structures lived experience and memory" (Mohan 2012: 174).[47] In my discussion of Ghosh's treatment of language in *The Hungry Tide*, I primarily focus on two aspects. First, I analyze the role Kanai plays as a translator between Piya and Fokir. I highlight how Kanai's presence indicates the structural necessity of externalization, and that the novel thereby rejects the possibility of unmediated communication. Language thus illustrates true infinity as a form of self-relation through otherness. Second, I analyze how Nirmal's notebook serves as a meta-commentary on language and its relation to literary form. More specifically, the notebook functions as a formal mediation of diverse linguistic, cultural, and narrative flows, like *The Hungry Tide*. The crucial difference between the notebook and the novel is that the novel gives voice to both Nirmal's poetic-revolutionary mindset and Nilima's prosaic-reformistic practice.

The initial time which Piya spends together with Fokir makes her believe that they, despite lacking a common language, share a deep bond due to their interest in nature. During a boat trip, they fulfill their respective tasks of geo-mapping and crab-fishing. Piya finds it serendipitous that "two such different people [could] pursue their own ends simultaneously – people who could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads" (*HT* 118). Based on Fokir's facial expression, Piya surmises that he must be thinking along similar lines: "he too was amazed by the seamless intertwining of their pleasures and their purposes" (*HT* 118). Piya romanticizes this situation so much that she calls

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[47] In chapter 4, I return to Mohan's observation and argue that Ghosh's foregrounding of writing and textuality reveals the constructedness of literary works, thereby indicating to his readers that the novel should not be taken as a definitive or exhaustive account of life in the Sundarbans.

human speech “only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being” (*HT* 132). Language can lead to misunderstandings, yet this possibility to err is not an external barrier but an internal limit that opens language’s truly infinite dimension. Piya laments language’s capacity as a “means of shutting each other out” (*HT* 132). The problem with such a one-sided view of language is not simply that it cannot be otherwise, but that the duplicity of language is a constitutive element for its creative possibilities. Yet because Piya regards language as “a bag of tricks,” she feels it is “more honest […] that [she and Fokir] could not speak” directly with each other (*HT* 132). The narrative irony of Piya’s comments about language becomes evident in the aftermath of the tiger-killing scene (discussed more in detail in section 3.3), when Piya is forced to confront her view of Fokir as an apparently like-minded individual. Their lack of a common language leads Piya to misrecognize Fokir’s relation to animals. Consequently, Piya’s horror at watching the scene stems not only from the fact that a tiger is being burned to death but equally from the shock of seeing that Fokir is not who she imagined him to be.

Concerning the above-discussed dialogue between Piya and Kanai on the day after the tiger-killing, it is worth considering the allusion to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in the following passage: “Kanai prompted her as she faltered. ‘The horror?’ ‘The horror. Yes. I wonder if I’ll ever be able to forget it’” (*HT* 248). The minimal repetition of the phrase “the horror” is not accidental. Bartosch convincingly argues that the difference between Kurtz’s monologic phrase about the horrors of the Congo and the dialogic exchange between Piya and Kanai is crucial for comprehending the view of language offered by the novel. As Bartosch puts it, the crucial difference is that “Piya and Kanai both effectively formulate, via language, a way of dealing with their experience: they invoke Conrad’s ‘The horror, the horror!’ dialogically and thus share the experience of the unspeakable” (Bartosch 2013: 114). Language serves as a form of self-relating through otherness, which allows its users to gain a richer understanding of oneself, others, and the rest of the world.

Apart from the times they are alone together, Piya and Fokir primarily communicate with the help of Kanai, and his role in the trio highlights the complex nature of human language. One could view their dependence on Kanai as a negative restriction preventing Piya and Fokir from expressing their innermost thoughts and feelings without requiring an external mediator for a twofold reason: 1) they may feel reluctant to express themselves about certain topics due

to Kanai's presence, and 2) if he wished to do so, Kanai could relatively easily twist the meaning of their words. The fact that language may sometimes appear to be "only a bag of tricks," as Piya puts it, is a structural possibility of language. If human beings could simply communicate without any equivocation, there would be no uniquely human language. This is not simply a negative predicament but equally what opens the possibility for all the creative gifts of language—literature being but one among many. Even if Fokir and Piya *did* share a common language, their communication would still require externalization because externalization is a necessary element of any language or self-relation. Hence, Kanai partly serves as the novel's embodiment of the structural necessity of mediation in any relations with oneself or others. The double-sided nature of language and its relation to finitude is likewise discussed by Cheah, who observes that *The Hungry Tide* "explicitly emphasizes that translation is premised on finitude, in this case, that of languages and cultures." Hence, the limits of language are simultaneously both positive and negative: "There are barriers between languages and cultures, but because these barriers are porous, translation and communication across cultures is possible and can even lead to an augmentation of meaning" (Cheah 2016: 274). This encapsulates the truly infinite way of relating to finitude as a productive condition of possibility.

The issue of translation is evoked through Kanai's experiences as a translator. Moyna tells Kanai that he must acknowledge his responsibility as a translator because the words of Piya and Fokir "will be in your hands and you can make them mean what you will" (*HT* 214). More vividly, his time alone with Fokir on a boat trip to Garjontola, an island said to be inhabited by tigers, makes Kanai more acutely aware of his role as a translator between Piya and Fokir. Suspecting that Fokir is trying to make the area appear intimidating, Kanai realizes that Fokir is thereby foregrounding his own indispensability as a local guide. Kanai recognizes that his own occupation bears a certain resemblance because admitting one's own dispensability as a translator would be "to destroy the value of your word, and thus your work. It was precisely because of his awareness of this dilemma that he knew too that there were times when a translator's bluff had to be called" (*HT* 265). Upon arriving on Garjontola, Kanai's frustration at Fokir culminates in the former's humiliating fall in the mud.[48] Briefly fearing that Fokir

[48] This incident parallels Piya's own fall in the mud earlier in the novel (*HT* 41).

might have brought him there to die, Kanai experiences a "momentary sensation of being transported out of his body and into another." In his past experiences of seeing himself from the outside by virtue of being a translator, "it was as if the instrument of language had metamorphosed – instead of being a barrier, a curtain that divided, it had become a transparent film, a prism that allowed him to look through another set of eyes, to filter the world through a mind other than his own" (*HT* 270). These thoughts echo Piya's remark about speech being "a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being" (*HT* 132). Kanai's experience of seeing himself from the outside is unlikely to be a fully adequate representation of what Fokir may have thought at that moment. Be that as it may, Kanai's experience of imagining what he may look like from the outside nonetheless has a transformative effect on him as a translator and as a person.

Kanai's transformation is discernible in his act of relating Fokir's musical rendition of the myth of Bon Bibi to Piya. Shortly before their trip to Garjontola, Fokir starts "chanting a part of the Bon Bibi legend," but Kanai claims that he cannot translate it for Piya because "the meter is too complicated" (*HT* 255). After the incident on the island, however, Kanai writes a letter to Piya, which she reads near the end of the novel (*HT* 291-298). Most of the letter contains Kanai's translation of the legend (*HT* 292-297). Prefacing the story, he explains that the experience on the island made him realize "how little I know of myself and of the world" and that, despite his flaws, he could give her "something that no one else can" (*HT* 291). This gift "beyond price" is his translation of the legend, and he insists that any flaws in the translation at least "will prevent me from fading from sight, as a good translator should. For once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible" (*HT* 291; 292). Kanai finally acknowledges that he can use his capacity as a translator to help others, rather than as a demonstration of his own linguistic abilities to impress women like Piya. More broadly conceived, Kanai's comment powerfully illuminates that language can make people visible as agents who are imperfect but therefore also dependent on external mediation to sustain themselves as relational beings. Instead of viewing language as purely parasitic on communication, *The Hungry Tide* reveals that language's duplicity is constitutive of its creative gifts.

Our mode of relating to the limits of language matters for how we view literature because language's inherently creative impulse is a vital ingredient in literature's politically formalist potential for modeling possible worlds. If language were simply a matter of

unmediated communication, and hence solely finite and bereft of excess, it would be nothing more than social documentation. Though few literary scholars would confess to holding such an opinion of language, the position that regards literary realism as social documentation is widespread. A New Historicist, for example, would likely admit that a literary text does not give unmediated access to a bygone historical reality since language often distorts the historical reality which it represents. As such, the New Historicist literary critic's task would be to supplement the literary texts in question with other textual forms of social documentation from the historical period in which the literary text was produced. By situating the literary text in a concrete historical context, one would thereby gain a more adequate picture. This may sound commonsensical, which testifies to the hegemonic status of this view of literary realism. One crucial flaw is that this position holds that social circumstances are entirely determinative of a literary text, thereby erasing any form of agency. According to McGowan's critique, the problem with (New) Historicism "is that it views history as a series of successes, of occasions in which the historical context completely constructs—and therefore determines—the events that occur within it." If our reading practices are rigidly historicist, "we will be unable to conceive of the possibility of genuine historical change" (McGowan 2017: 93).

To view literary texts as entirely determined by external circumstances renders literary production a wholly finite matter, bereft of creative freedom. Building on Kornbluh's and McGowan's critiques of New Historicism but highlighting the issue of finitude, I would add that the problem stems from an implicit conception of language's finitude as only constraining. This is one reason why Kornbluh's theorization of political formalism is infinitely more constructive for articulating the formal dimensions of literary realism. Kornbluh does not theorize realist novels as always trying (but failing) to represent an already-existing reality. On the contrary, political formalism asserts that literary realism ponders the constructability and destructibility of social forms by modeling the integral connections of possible worlds.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Nirmal's notebook, as a book within a book, is an explicit thematization of linguistic mediation as constitutive of literary form. The notebook, like the novel, contains a variety of different textual forms. Most significantly, Nirmal ends each section by quoting different passages from his favorite poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. That Rilke's *Duino Elegies* is not only the notebook's but also "the novel's most pervasive literary resource," indicates, according to Cheah, that it would be wrong to claim that *The Hungry Tide* privileges

the local at the expense of the global. On the contrary, "Ghosh's obsessive use of a European poet suggests that this vision ['of a world made up of plural histories' – Cheah's phrase] can only be adequately portrayed by a novel with an equally deep *textual* history" (Cheah 2016: 269). Bartosch notes that Rilke's poetry is included in Ramachandra Guha's *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2000: 17-18), and that Guha "describes Rilke […] as one of the patron saints of German environmental thinking." In that sense, Ghosh's use of Rilke, Bartosch claims, "offers an interpretive challenge as to whether to read it as an instance of 'Western' canonical hegemony or as a form of shared literary meaning" (Bartosch 2013: 134).

Cheah convincingly highlights that Nirmal's notebook embodies the amalgamation of plural stories from around the globe since "it weaves together European and non-European texts—Rilke, Bengali oral folk poetry, chants of Islamic-Arabic origin, and so on—in a manner that reflects the Sundarbans' complex cultural landscape" (Cheah 2016: 269-270). The notebook negotiates the complex relation between local and global concerns, a crucial task for apprehending a planetary crisis that affects local environments in distinct ways. What Nirmal's notebook lacks, in contrast to the novel, is a proper negotiation of the politics of reform and revolution. In section 3.5, I argue that both *The Hungry Tide* and Nilima's BDT convincingly indicate the coordinates by which a contemporary emancipatory ecopolitics must abide.

Many of Cheah's observations are valuable, but I disagree with his claim that "*The Hungry Tide* subscribes to a simplistic ethical view of translation as the perfect conveyance of meaning that brings about a transparency between minds and cultures" (Cheah 2016: 272). As I have argued in this section, the novel does almost the exact opposite by highlighting the need for externalization which opens the possibility of equivocation. Cheah concedes that "against its authorial grain, the novel also problematizes its function as deep communication and puts into question the power of stories to mend and hold the world together by pointing to the impossibility of arriving at a condition of perfect meaningfulness" (Cheah 2016: 272). True, the novel presents communication completely bereft of equivocation as impossible, but this is not against the authorial grain, based on my reading of the novel. Because the novel demonstrates language's non-transparency, it does not "present[] itself as a mere auxiliary aid for relaying" (Cheah 2016: 272) the stories of dead refugees and fishermen, which Cheah claims. Making visible violent acts of injustice is clearly one reason why Ghosh wrote *The Hungry Tide*, but this is not the only valuable dimension of the novel. As I argue in the following

section and the next chapter, *The Hungry Tide* is an exemplary politically formalist text because it suggests the need to build and sustain social spaces. This is the novel's most original contribution for articulating the relation between literature and politics in a time of crisis.

3.5 Forms of Ecopolitics

There are two main representations of politics in *The Hungry Tide*: Sir Daniel Hamilton's utopian project and Nilima's BDT. In this final section of my reading of the novel, I provide an account of how the tension between these diverging forms of politics demonstrates the politically formalist truth that freedom can only be actualized within formal collectives and social institutions. Like elsewhere in this thesis, my argument hinges on how we relate to our own finitude. To reiterate, true infinity does not encompass an abolition of finitude but instead requires acknowledging that an internal limit, like the violence and unpredictability of natural disasters, is a constitutive condition of possibility for political freedom. Mortality is what opens the possibility for life, including the possibility of both flourishing and floundering. I argue that Nilima's prosaic project is not simply an act of bestowing charity but crucially foregrounds the necessity of forms of collective self-legislation for the sustenance of finite lives. Nilima's project of relating to her own finitude as a positive condition for helping others is thus the most vivid illustration in this thesis of a truly infinite form of ecopolitics.

Large sections of Nirmal's notebook are devoted to commemorating the English businessman Sir Daniel Hamilton's project of establishing small cooperative communities in the Sundarbans. Nirmal explains that Hamilton wished to use some of his wealth to "build a new society, a new kind of country. […] Here people wouldn't exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land" (*HT* 45). This utopian vision gained support from "*bujowa* [bourgeois] nationalists" because "this place could be a model for all of India" (*HT* 45).[49] This project was not merely a colonial uprooting of traditional forms of social organization. In fact,

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[49] Jalais explains that "Hamilton was in close contact with [Mahatma] Gandhi and [Rabindranath] Tagore. The latter even visited the place in December 1932 and with him Hamilton launched the 'Gosaba-Bolpur Co-Operative Training Institute' whose mission was to train people to launch co-operative societies in India's rural areas" (Jalais 2011: 41).

Hamilton gained support from the islanders, and his ideals are fondly remembered by them, according to Jalais's account. Hamilton's story is popular among the islanders because "it gives their islands a sense of history rooted in lofty ideals of social justice and equitable redistribution of wealth. It was this initial just distribution of land which had made these islands peaceful, explained the islanders" (Jalais 2011: 42). In *The Hungry Tide*, such a view is primarily discernible in Nirmal's poetic devotion to Hamilton's utopian project. In the end, however, this project both lived and died with Hamilton's person. After his death in 1937, the cooperatives were broken up by the bhadralok[50] trustees and "in the late 1950s, the government seized the [Hamilton] Trust on the grounds that it had become a zamindari[51]" (Jalais 2011: 42).

Nilima's project of establishing a safe community for widows of deceased fishermen is considerably more modest than Hamilton's ideals. Shortly after arriving in the region, Nilima discovers the unfortunate predicament for the many widows of Lusibari. Due to the precarious nature of work for the local fishers, "girls were brought up on the assumption that if they married, they would be widowed in their twenties – their thirties if they were lucky" (*HT* 67). Since there were few "men of marriageable age" left, it was unrealistic to marry even though remarriage was not illegal. As a result, "widowhood often meant a lifetime of dependence and years of abuse and exploitation" (*HT* 68). This situation is what Nilima commits most of her remaining lifetime to mitigate. Rather than trying to ascertain which social category would best describe the fate of the widows, Nilima unconditionally seeks to help them: "It was thus, when reality ran afoul of her vocabulary, that Nilima had her epiphany. It did not matter what they were; what mattered was that they should not remain what they were" (*HT* 68). In the years after the Hamilton Estate was demolished, Nilima's Women's Union on Lusibari grew, later being expanded to include "medical, paralegal, agricultural [services]" and eventually being reorganized as the Babadon Development Trust (*HT* 69).

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[50] This term literally means 'gentle-folk' and "comes from *Bhadra*, translatable as a mix of 'polite', 'civil' and 'cultured', that is, bearing resonances of middle-class sensitivity to culture and refinement, and *lok* which is 'group' or 'people'. 'Bhadralok' carries connotations not only of landed wealth but also of education, culture and anglicisation and of upper-caste exclusiveness" (Jalais 2011: 28).

[51] The zamindari system was a form of landownership, abolished in the late 1960s (Jalais 2011: 4).

Nirmal views the eventual downfall of Hamilton's project not as internal to the project itself but as a result of external circumstances. Consequently, he regards Hamilton's dream as a regulative ideal that may be realized in a distant future: "Don't laugh, Kanai – it was just that the tide country wasn't ready yet. Someday, who knows? It may yet come to be" (*HT* 46). Despite initially having found repulsive the thought of "of being associated with an enterprise founded by a leading capitalist," Nirmal realized that the locals appreciated Hamilton's efforts: "It was clear that in the eyes of the local people the visionary Scotsman was, if not quite a deity, then certainly a venerated ancestral spirit. […] Nirmal and Nilima were forced to revise their initial skepticism" (*HT* 66). It is with Hamilton's ideals in mind that Nirmal perceives the social life established by the Morichjhãpi settlers. Having expected a "mere jumble perhaps, untidy heaps of people piled high upon each other," Nirmal is amazed by the refugees' sustained "industry" and "diligence" in creating the foundations of a community in the space of weeks. "Taking in these sights," Nirmal recollects in his notebook, "I felt the onrush of a strange, heady excitement: suddenly it dawned on me that I was watching the birth of something new, something hitherto unseen" (*HT* 141). Despite the similarity with Hamilton's project, Nirmal identifies a crucial difference between the refugees and Hamilton: "this was not one man's vision. This dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real" (*HT* 141). Hence, Nirmal recognizes that institutions require collective efforts to be sustained.

Although Nirmal's comment could potentially be interpreted as a dig at Nilima's project, insofar as she is clearly the primary driving force behind it, I would argue otherwise. As readers, we do not see what comes out of the BDT if, and when, Nilima dies. Yet it is reasonable to assume that it will not suffer the same fate as the Hamilton Trust. The reason is that the BDT is not sustained solely by Nilima. Although she was its instigator, she has worked purposively to make it a community which the inhabitants of Lusibari can benefit from and help sustain together. Even the name of the trust is not directly tied to Nilima's person, unlike the Hamilton Trust. The naming of the project is crucial insofar as both its original and current names—the Lusibari Women's Union and the Babadon Development Trust respectively—delimit and express the purpose animating the project. In that sense, the act of naming is the instantiation of an internal limit which organizes the kind of work the project is supposed to conduct. At the end of the novel, Piya proclaims her intentions of participating in this project.

This suggests that the purpose of BDT is limited rather than limitless but still open to anyone wishing to join the project. This is the nature of a truly infinite form of ecopolitics.

Nilima explicitly speaks about her commitment to the project on Lusibari in terms of her own finitude, and she views this as a positive condition of possibility for helping others. Speaking to her nephew Kanai about Nirmal, Nilima explains why she likely would not be very sympathetic towards Nirmal's account in his notebook of their time together in the Sundarbans. She tells Kanai that, as a finite living being, she is

> not capable of dealing with the whole world's problems. For me the challenge of making a few little things better in one small place is enough. That place for me is Lusibari. I've given it everything I can, and yes, after all these years it has amounted to something. It's helped people; it's made a few people's lives a little better. But that was never enough for Nirmal. For him it had to be all or nothing, and of course that's what he ended up with – nothing. (*HT* 318-319)

Here Nilima succinctly articulates the link between constitutive finitude and spiritual freedom. Unlike Nirmal, Nilima identified a particular endeavor through which she could make a substantial difference for those whom it would affect. Affirming her finitude as a constitutive possibility for her freedom to help others achieve their freedom as fellow finite beings is the core of why Nilima is a figure of a truly infinite form of ecopolitics. Nilima's delimitation involves not only choosing a given place where she can help but also figuring out what form this help may take. Decisions of this kind always depend on one's own epistemological limitations. While she lacks Piya's scientific expertise as a cetologist, Kanai's linguistic capabilities as a professional translator, and Fokir's practical knowledge as a local crab-fisher, Nilima evidently knows how to build and sustain a community.

Although Nilima accuses Nirmal of having ended up with nothing, the novel suggests that this judgment is not entirely fair. Both the cyclone shelter and the notebook outlast Nirmal's own life, even if the notebook requires reconstruction after being destroyed during the storm. The cyclone shelter, which was Nirmal's idea, is a perfect example of how structures save lives.[52] Because of the shelter, the only casualty from the cyclone is Fokir, who sacrifices

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[52] This may be compared to Ghosh's visit to the island Car Nicobar shortly after the 2004 tsunami, about which he recalls seeing five structures remaining of the town Malacca, the last structure being "the

himself for Piya. After the storm has passed, Nilima admits that "[m]aking us build [the cyclone shelter] was probably the most important thing [Nirmal] did in his whole life," even as she believes Nirmal would have scoffed at this idea and called it "just social service – not revolution" (*HT* 320). Consequently, I believe Alexa Weik correctly observes that "Nirmal's cosmopolitan concern for the world's problems, then, *has* had local and very concrete and long-lasting effects, effects which are—if not in scope, at least in kind—very much in keeping with his ideals" (Weik 2006: 136). Nirmal may never have realized it during his lifetime, but the novel suggests that any ecopolitics which seeks to adequately prepare for current and future environmental crises must be attentive to both reform *and* revolution simultaneously.

That Nilima's project is the most politically efficacious in the novel can be supported with further evidence based on the novel's focalization. For most of the novel, the narrative is dualistically divided between the intertwining focalizations of Piya and Kanai. As Bartosch notes, this changes only in the final chapter of the novel ("Home: An Epilogue" [*HT* 324-329]), where Nilima becomes the focalizer. Until this moment, Nilima is only present via direct (but quoted) speech from the other focalizers (Bartosch 2013: 128). Bartosch convincingly argues that this indicates the centrality of Nilima's project as arguably the most substantial contribution to the well-being of people in the region. "That the novel rewards this with a 'last word' through her focalisation in the last chapter," Bartosch suggests, "can therefore be read as an optimistic remark on the necessity of pragmatism, which must accompany every visionary and revolutionary ecological ethics" (Bartosch 2013: 129-130). Such an interpretation, which I support, opposes readings that criticize the novel's supposedly neat or improbable ending,[53]

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skeleton of a church, with a row of parallel arches rising from the rubble like the bleached ribs of a dead animal. This was the structure that had saved the life of the Director's son" (Ghosh 2005: 22).

[53] Several critics have found the ending unconvincing, calling the narrative solution "naïve and simplistic" (Anand 2008: 40); "a 'last of the Mohicans' scenario in which the 'authentic' subaltern dies so that the idea of subalternity may live on in a non-subaltern future" (Li 2009: 290); or that the ending "fails to dispel the residual unease surrounding the earlier episode of the tortured tiger" (Huggan and Tiffin 2015: 205). Both Terri Tomsky (2009: 62; 65n13) and Shakti Jaising (Jaising 2015 86-87n9) observe that critics found the ending unsatisfactory shortly after the novel's publication, citing Nell Freudenberger's review (2005) in *The Nation*. Mukherjee and Heise proclaim it tempting to view the ending as "a redemption song for the elites and a (painful) celebration of their homecoming" (Mukherjee 2010: 132)

where Piya settles in the region and contributes to Nilima's project. Read differently, "[t]he novel ends," Mohan observes "on a note not of accomplishment but of work begun" (Mohan 2012: 178). By directing the attention to Nilima at the end of the novel, Ghosh foregrounds the politically formalist truth that forms are not barriers preventing us from endless possibilities of freedom but are actual sites in which we may sustain our practical commitments to others.

I thus disagree with Cheah's assessment that *The Hungry Tide* "clearly favors poetry over the prose of science and pragmatic social service in the reworlding of the subaltern world" (Cheah 2016: 271). By contrast, I argue that the novel forces us to revise our ordinary oppositional conception of the relation between reform and revolution. The political dimension of this is elucidated by Hägglund, who points out that reforms seeking to mitigate the worst consequences of a given situation are not necessarily anti-revolutionary (Hägglund 2021: 345-346). Although they are analytically distinct, there is no strict opposition between reform and revolution whereby one must choose between one or the other. That is a false dilemma which stems from a misconception of what political struggle entails. The point is to ascertain what end such reforms are supposed to serve. If the reforms simply serve to postpone a real confrontation with the fundamental contradictions of our social forms of life, then they may prove detrimental. This is highly evident if one accepts the argument that capitalist accumulation has played a major role in producing the climate crisis. If, however, the reforms are meant to inspire new ways of organizing and living together, they could function in a socially transformative manner. During a conversation recollected in the notebook, Nilima tells Nirmal: "To build something is not the same as dreaming of it. Building is always a matter of well-chosen compromises" (*HT* 178). To categorically reject attempts at reform or building communities because political forms are allegedly anti-revolutionary or inherently authoritarian is to relinquish the possibility of engaging in the collective struggle for better forms of living. Borrowing Kornbluh's succinct formula, political formalists acknowledge that "if you want to build, you have to start somewhere" (Kornbluh 2019: 79). The collective struggle animating political formalism affirms finitude as the basis for emancipation.

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or "sentimental" (Heise 2016: 200), yet both explain that Ghosh's novel problematizes such a reading because "it constantly raises questions about its own representative limits" (Mukherjee 2010: 132).

Responding to the planetary ecological crisis requires a reckoning with finitude. On a general ecopolitical level, such a response would follow the coordinates outlined by McGowan: "By starting with this unpredictability [of natural disasters] as the limit, social production would orient itself around addressing this limit without any possibility of ever transcending it" (McGowan 2016: 148). Such a reorientation requires creative solutions that are attentive to local and regional differences, like Nirmal's suggestion. To build and sustain a cyclone shelter requires acknowledging that the inhabitants of the Sundarbans cannot simply escape or will away the potentially disastrous storms. Constructing buildings in areas susceptible to natural disasters like cyclones, earthquakes, and heat waves requires an attentiveness to local and regional differences. Being built in vastly different climatic locations, a cabin in Northern Norway would obviously need different considerations than a village hut in the Sundarbans, even though they share the purpose of sustaining the lives of finite beings exposed to the potential hostility of nature. Nilima's BDT is thus not supposed to be a one-size-fits-all solution for a crisis which is planetary in nature, precisely because the effects of the crisis are distributed unequally and often incommensurably. As a result, the BDT and the cyclone shelter are models which should inspire readers of Ghosh's novel to ponder how similar initiatives may be enacted in their own local environments in the face of current and coming disastrous consequences of anthropogenic climate change. In the next chapter, I build on my readings of Spahr and Ghosh to argue for the politically formalist value of literature in a time of planetary ecological crisis.

4 The Political Efficacy of Ecopoetry and Ecofiction

In this chapter, I elaborate on my claim that politically formalist readings of contemporary ecopoetry and ecofiction illuminate the coordinates by which a viable response to our current planetary ecological crisis must abide. To that end, I build on my theoretical account of the connection between Hegel's true infinity and Kornbluh's political formalism. Likewise, I draw on the politically formalist resources that Spahr's poetry and Ghosh's fiction provide for rethinking our relation to finitude in an ecopolitical context. I begin by recapitulating my arguments from the two preceding chapters. Next, I briefly clarify how my readings of Spahr and Ghosh differ from Kornbluh's interpretations of 19th century realist novels. Finally, I specify what limited but crucial difference literary works like *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and *The Hungry Tide* make in a time of crisis.

In chapter 2, I argued that Spahr's ecopoetry is informed by the politically formalist truth that forms are necessary for sustaining finite lives. I observed that Spahr's explicit discussions of the relation between poetry and politics in her critical writings revolve around the question of form and finitude. An example of this is when Spahr asserts, in an interview, that she "think[s] of writing less as a resistant practice and more as a place where one explores new alliances and builds new structures that require lots of scaffoldings" (Spahr 2005b: 5). Elsewhere, she affirms her appreciation of lyrics that "are not at all ignorant about structures [and] that comment on community and that move lyric away from individualism to shared, connective spaces" (Spahr 2002: 11). Spahr's ecopoetry is politically formalist in the precise sense that it thematizes how political and social forms of organization affect our relation to more-than-human nature. This is why Spahr is an ecopoet rather than a nature poet. In her own words, Spahr writes not "about a beautiful bird in a tree" but "about a beautiful bird and the bulldozer off to the side that is coming to destroy the tree" (Goldsmith and Spahr 2016: 413).

In my reading of *TCEL*, I outlined four forms of truly infinite relations to finitude which the book highlights: 1) corporeal vulnerability, 2) loving relationality, 3) technological globalization, and 4) forms of ecopolitics. These dimensions are all intimately related and together co-constitute the connection that *TCEL* forges between true infinity and political formalism. Our corporeal limits expose us to the natural world's potentially hazardous environments, yet they simultaneously serve as preconditions for sustaining ourselves as living

beings capable of making distinctions of value. I cannot sustain myself as a singular living organism without interacting with my surroundings. Being embodied and vulnerable is thus a necessary but productive limit. As vulnerable creatures, we depend on others. Corporeal limits thus allow for the emergence of loving relationality. Recalling Hegel's passage, love is a truly infinite form of relating to another because "[t]he lover who takes is not thereby made richer than the other; he is enriched indeed, but only so much as the other is. So too the giver does not make himself poorer; by giving to the other he has at the same time and to the same extent enhanced his own treasure" (*ETW*: 307). Spahr insists that the most beautiful, and therefore valuable, thing in the world is "the sight of the ones you love, those you've met and those you haven't" (*TCEL* 47). Loving another does not imply being fully present all the time. Moments of being together are valuable only if the possibility of separation is present. Technological globalization enacts a quasi-erasure of distance which promises global connectedness yet simultaneously gives rise to new forms of hostility. The duplicity of technology is not simply a by-product but an inherent possibility in all forms of mediation. Advanced technologies have made it possible to view Earth from space and these images finitize the infinite multiplicity of life on Earth. But the historical development of ecopolitics only became a real possibility in the wake of the first images of Earth being televised around the globe. In *TCEL*, Spahr emphatically rejects the promise of escaping the planet as a viable political strategy. She instead insists on the need to struggle politically for better forms of living.

In chapter 3, I showed how Ghosh's fiction forges the connection between true infinity and political formalism. I drew attention to how his non-fiction foregrounds the link between finitude and political forms in an ecopolitical context. These concerns are brought to the forefront in Ghosh's evocation of the tsunami and earthquake that devastated South-East Asia on Boxing Day 2004. "The tsunami, in the suddenness of its onslaught allowed for no preparations. Not only did it destroy the survivors' homes and decimate their families; it also robbed them of all the evidentiary traces of their place in the world" (Ghosh 2005: 2-3). Sufficiently preparing for a climatic state of exception is impossible, but for Ghosh, thinking that we can ever do *enough* leads to complacency or paralysis. No finite amount of relief can replace a life lost, but we can nonetheless make a difference for the survivors of a natural disaster. We must acknowledge the limited effect each of us can have to make the world a better place, without any illusions that the results will be perfect. A perfect life without the possibility

of failure and tragic loss is a life devoid of meaning and not worth living. Political formalism is therefore an inherently pragmatic and practical relation to constitutive finitude and political forms, as indicated by Nilima's project in *The Hungry Tide*.

In my reading of *The Hungry Tide*, I outlined three forms of truly infinitely relating to finitude that the book conveys: 1) spatial finitude, 2) language, and 3) forms of ecopolitics. Over the years, thousands of fishermen have been killed by tigers in the Sundarbans. As a result, the locals have developed routines and strategies to minimize the chances of being mauled to death. Unlike the West Bengal government that enacted a brutal eviction of refugees from the island of Moricjhãpi in 1979, the islanders believe that humans and other animals can coinhabit the Sundarbans, but not always in harmony. Ghosh critiques naïve forms of conservationism that neglect the concerns of locals in favor of the aestheticized Bengal tiger. As a work of fiction, *The Hungry Tide* conveys how the limits of language are ineradicable. Kanai's mediation between Piya and Fokir embodies language's necessary moment of externalization. Because language structurally requires externalization, it is a way of relating to finitude as a positive condition. Further, Nirmal's notebook is Ghosh's explicit thematization of the mediation of language as constitutive of literary form. The final form of truly infinitely relating to finitude I identified in *The Hungry Tide* is Nilima's BDT as a model for ecopolitics. Rather than lamenting the impossibility of helping everyone everywhere all at once, Nilima calculates the limited way in which she can make life better for the inhabitants of Lusibari. By inhabiting a constructive relation to her own finitude, Nilima builds a truly infinite form of ecopolitics.

Political formalism is a universal but plastic project. It foregrounds the universal need for forms yet simultaneously highlights the malleability of existing forms. Animating my thesis is a conviction that adapting Kornbluh's theoretical framework requires an attentiveness to the historically unique climatic state of exception in which we currently live. Unlike the Victorian novels informing Kornbluh's theorization of political formalism, Spahr's poetry and Ghosh's fiction aim to reach a global readership and thereby convey the ecopolitical question concerning finitude. The climate crisis testifies to the ineradicable fragility of terrestrial life. A response to this crisis requires an acknowledgment that limits are necessary for the sustenance of more-than-human life. In the previous chapters, I have argued how *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and *The Hungry Tide* thematize and formally enact these concerns. As Ghosh famously observes, the climate crisis is equally a crisis of culture and a crisis of the imagination. Our

contemporary moment therefore requires other cultural and political forms than the 19th century did. Nobody would claim that literature could save the planet, never mind on its own. It is therefore crucial to discern what limited but therefore productive role literature inhabits. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that one such dimension is literature's capacity to imagine the malleability of social forms. This is crucial for imagining how we might organize our social forms more constructively for a radically different natural and political climate.

Part of my project is to investigate whether Kornbluh's politically formalist framework can be adapted to other literary forms than 19th century realist novels. I have demonstrated that ecopoetry, exemplified by Spahr, lends itself to such a politically formalist remodeling. At first glance, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* seems like the exact opposite of the 19th century realist novels Kornbluh excavates for politically formalist resources. Spahr's text is a book of lyric poetry, written in a diary-like format, which gives a singular subjectively situated account of everyday life in the early 21st century. This would seem a far cry from a 19th century realist novel like *Bleak House*, "[a]n eminently maximalist text, endlessly esteemed as 'massive,' pedestaled as the very archetype of realism, [and] famously encompass[ing] the biggest city in the nineteenth century and the foundational institution underwriting it, the law" (Kornbluh 2019: 79).[54] The contrast between Spahr and Dickens is striking, and Kornbluh's theorization of political formalism's origins is firmly rooted in the 19th century. The main reason for Kornbluh's delimitation is her observation about the historical co-emergence of mathematical formalism, Marxist materialism, and literary realism in the mid-19th century. In her readings of 19th century realist novels, Kornbluh outlines how many of these novels exhibit a peculiar interest in mathematical concepts or tropes. I have chosen to efface the mathematical dimension in my remodeling of Kornbluh's project to contemporary ecopoetry and ecofiction, even if infinity and limits are important mathematical concepts. This partly comes down to my own temporal and epistemological constraints, but also because I believe it is possible to

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[54] Despite *Bleak House*'s supposed maximalism, Kornbluh argues that Dickens's tome is surprisingly minimalist, consisting of "bounded settings, a tight repertoire of architectural tropes, a small cast of pivotal actors, incomplete plotting, and the iconic split narration whittle and winnow this novel's amplitude" (Kornbluh 2019: 79). According to Kornbluh's argument, the book's minimalism is precisely what allows *Bleak House* to model social space.

demonstrate how politically formalist concerns inform contemporary ecopoetry and ecofiction without explicit references to math.

By staying within the bounds of the lyric but appropriating the form for the current historical moment, Spahr negotiates the local-global continuum and thereby highlights the politically formalist efficacy of ecopoetry. Once again recalling Spahr's own observation about the relevance of lyric poetry for the contemporary moment, the crucial aspect is the lyric's "attention to connection [and] its dwelling on the beloved and on the afar" (*TCEL* 13) which made the form appropriate for Spahr's concerns. By delimiting the scope of her book, Spahr lyrically insists on the intimate relations between the microscopic and macroscopic aspects of life on Earth. Writing in a lyric mode forces her to write from a given viewpoint as a finite living being, but this simultaneously allows her to imagine seeing the Earth from elsewhere. By juxtaposing the calm planet seen from space with the conflict-ridden field of political struggle in which she partakes, Spahr foregrounds that she is not a solitary sovereign speaker.

Spahr's thematization of technological globalization is the primary way in which she conveys the planetary dimension of the contemporary crisis. Her mediation of local and global shows how the crisis is simultaneously both universal and singular. It is universal because it concerns all living beings on Earth. The crisis is singular because it is a historically unique situation but equally because its consequences are distributed unequally. Writing from a singular perspective therefore highlights how a response to the planetary ecological crisis must be attentive to the specificity of the local environments in which actual living beings sustain their lives. This is why Spahr unequivocally praises the "glimmers of individuals" as the most valuable and beautiful aspect of terrestrial life.

Like Spahr, Ghosh seeks to reach a potentially global audience with his fiction. This is evident in the focalization employed in *The Hungry Tide*. The novel's focalization indicates Ghosh's two main intended audiences: Kanai represents urban upper-middle class Indians, who know little about social life in the Sundarbans despite living within the same national boundaries as large parts of the Sundarbans. Meanwhile, Piya represents the environmentally-engaged, well-meaning cosmopolitan foreigner who does not understand the local language. Even though the novel is set in a delimited place and consists of a limited number of characters, *The Hungry Tide* nonetheless conveys a planetary predicament to a potentially global audience.

Because many of his readers are unfamiliar with the Sundarbans, Ghosh evokes a wide variety of textual forms throughout the novel to insist that his novel should not be read as an exhaustive representation of life in the region. It is worth recalling Mohan's observation that *The Hungry Tide*, "[m]ore than any other work by Ghosh, […] is about writing and textuality and draws attention to the ways in which language structures lived experience and memory" (Mohan 2012: 174). Ghosh is distinctly aware that literature's material is language. He thus incorporates textual forms like poems, songs, diaries, oral legends, and scientific reports in the novel. *The Hungry Tide* thereby highlights its fictional world's textuality not to neglect the real-life events and places from which the novel partly draws inspiration but to insist on the formal constructedness of every world. Borrowing Kornbluh's phrase, the novel does not represent *the* world but models *a* world, which, to be sure, draws on aspects of a given historical reality.

Following Kornbluh, literary realism's power stems not from a supposed verisimilitude but from its politically formalist modeling of social space. This is why Nilima's Babadon Development Trust plays such a significant role in Ghosh's novel. Nilima serves as a model figure in a politically formalist context because she acknowledges that a singular living being cannot save the whole world herself. Nonetheless, she acknowledges the possibility of making a limited but real difference in the lives of others. Structures can lead to both flourishing and floundering. It all depends on the specific formal configuration. This is why it is so crucial to comprehend how concrete forms are built rather than indiscriminately tear everything down. The structure of a house literally affects whether an inhabitant dies or survives as a result of natural disasters like cyclones or earthquakes. Likewise, the political forms, social structures, and economic modes of production which constitute our collective forms of self-organization directly impact the habitability of all regions on Earth.

Like Nilima, both Spahr and Ghosh acknowledge their own spatiotemporal and epistemological limitations as living beings writing literary works. The English poet W. H. Auden once quipped that "poetry makes nothing happen," and this is central for Spahr's discussion of poetry in a time of crisis. On its own, literature cannot save life on this planet. What literature can do is illuminate how we are always already animated by our mortal desire to live on together within political forms and social institutions. In Spahr's words: "is poetry enough? […] the answer is of course not. Poetry is only one part of enough. The part that changes the brain" (Spahr 2007b: 133). In my readings of their works, I have sought to make

explicit what is implicit in Spahr's ecopoetry and Ghosh's ecofiction, which is the political efficacy of ecopoetry and ecofiction. I do not impose upon authors like Spahr and Ghosh the task of writing about finitude or political forms. On the contrary, their works illustrate how these concerns always already animate our desire to live on as finite beings collectively struggling for lives worth sustaining together with others.

Ecopoetry and ecofiction may change our brains, but the crucial question is whether they "also change our feet" (Spahr 2007b: 133). Although neither Spahr's ecopoetry nor Ghosh's ecofiction provide one-size-fits-all solutions to how we may build differently in a time of planetary ecological crisis, their works nonetheless formally foreground some principles worth consideration. The most relevant aspects in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* are lists and repetition. In section 2.6, I argued that Spahr's lists formally enact important aspects of political formalism. Spahr's lists are repetitive in nature because they suggest an equivalence between the entries, but each entry introduces something unique to the list. Listing 114 places of protests thus serves a twofold function. First, it highlights the universality of political struggle due to the sheer number of places, spread around the globe. Second, because every entry is irreducible to each other, Spahr's list indicates the specificity of each place. Although this list does not directly concern an ecological issue, these two points are still highly relevant in an ecopolitical context. Spahr's lists formally demonstrate that the planetary ecological crisis concerns us all but also that it impacts us in radically distinct but interrelated ways. In *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh's thematization of translation foregrounds the need to negotiate this tension between universality and singularity, global and local. Because a planetary crisis affects the different regions of the planet in wildly different ways, knowledge about the local impact is crucial to imagine how to respond to the crisis. Collaboration is thus a crucial element. Respecting the rights of locals, like fishermen in the Sundarbans or Sámi reindeer owners in Norway, is a necessary component of effective forms of ecopolitics. Similarly, the consequences of forest fires in California and Pacific islands becoming uninhabitable due to rising sea levels clearly require different measures of mitigation.

The importance of literature and reading is indicated by Spahr's emphasis on corporeal vulnerability and Ghosh's thematization of translation. Through these formal elements, Spahr and Ghosh implicate their readers in the crisis. As I argued in section 2.3, the act of reading the first half of *TCEL* invites its readers to acknowledge their own corporeality as breathing beings.

Whether I choose to read the sections in single breaths or follow a steady rhythm that resembles heart beats, I cannot escape this confrontation with my own corporeal organization. To read anything at all, I must be a corporeally vulnerable organism depending on a range of metabolic interactions with nature. Ghosh implicates his readers in a different way, via his two main focalizers. Being born and raised in Norway, it is relatively easy for me to recognize that elements of Piya's discourse about the need to preserve endangered species resemble real-life campaigns. The destruction of habitats and the (mass) extinction of species is an incredibly important dimension of the planetary ecological crisis. But as the Morichjhãpi massacre indicates, there are ways in which such rhetoric can be abused. In early April 2023, 50 years after Project Tiger was initiated, news articles reported that the number of tigers in India has been steadily increasing the past few years. Yet none of the dozens of English-language news articles I read online makes any direct or oblique reference to the Morichjhãpi massacre. If the news is "not telling the necessary truths" (*TCEL* 33), literature is undoubtedly still vital today.

The process of reading and rereading is crucial for contemporary ecopolitics. Every natural event, like a heat wave or an earthquake, requires acts of interpretation. The planetary ecological crisis is not one homogenous phenomenon, but rather an amalgamation of distinct phenomena, many of which have been directly caused by the capitalist promise of endless economic growth. Heat waves and earthquakes are natural phenomena, yet their impacts are socially mediated and differentiated according to a range of factors. An act of rereading is always an act of recollecting a past experience. Conversely, with Scott's reading of Hegel, recollection "is always the name for reinterpretation, for rereading—for a rereading which is a site of commitment and heated contestation, and thus of continually renewed meaning" (Scott 2022: 115). Political commitments in the present thus require acts of recollecting the past and of continually reinterpreting the present in light of shifting conjunctures. Reading and writing affords us the opportunity to practice how to interpret and build better.

Finally, I would like to return to Ghosh's piece on the 2004 tsunami. Referring to the storm at the end of *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh relates the uncanny experience of learning about the earthquake and subsequent tsunami that originated in the Indian Ocean, only months after his novel's publication: "The news had a deeply unsettling effect on me: the images that had been implanted in my mind during the writing of *The Hungry Tide* merged with live television footage of the tsunami in a way that was almost overwhelming. I became frantic; I could not

focus on anything" (Ghosh 2016: 34). Cyclones and tsunamis are different natural phenomena, as Ghosh notes (Ghosh 2005: 18), but Weik suggests that the scene in the novel "seems to be almost a prediction of the catastrophic tsunami in Southeast Asia" (Weik 2006: 129). The reason is that the fundamental ecopolitical dimension behind both disasters is identical: "*The Hungry Tide* gives us a feeling for the sensitivity of regions such as the Sundarbans to storm tides produced by natural phenomena, and for the need of special protection and relief in such areas" (Weik 2006: 129). This is a profoundly politically formalist point. The destruction of homes and the countless deaths which the tsunami incurred indicates the inherent fragility of both human life and places of habitation. Far from being a reason to escape political life, events like these should instead reinvigorate a sense of urgency that we must aim to qualitatively and quantitatively improve our finite lifetimes together.

There will be irreversible damage to life on Earth as a result of anthropogenic climate change and other aspects of the planetary ecological crisis. What we can do is, however, to mitigate the worst consequences by reorganizing our political forms, social institutions, and economic modes of production. Although the crisis is planetary, it is difficult for most of us to act globally. This is why environmental activists in the 1970s adopted the phrase "think globally; act locally" as a slogan. To act locally does not mean that one can only be politically engaged in the arbitrary place in the world one is born and raised, as Nilima's case exemplifies, herself an immigrant to the Sundarbans. To briefly end on a hopeful note concerning the role of literature, Bartosch observes that Ghosh's novel "does not simply attest to what is already known: it opens up new ways of seeing" (Bartosch 2013: 107). I would simply add that, as exemplary politically formalist texts, both *The Hungry Tide* and *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* likewise open up new ways of building.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued for the political efficacy of contemporary ecopoetry and ecofiction in a time of crisis. To that end, I have offered politically formalist readings of Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. In my readings of these books, I have not offered policy proposals for how to mitigate effects of anthropogenic climate change or other aspects of the crisis. This is not aim of literary criticism. As I indicated in chapter 4, it is still possible to draw certain implications from my readings of Spahr and Ghosh. In general, the crucial takeaway is that contemporary ecopolitics must be attentive to both critique and construction. As I put it in chapter 2: construction without critique is empty, critique without construction is blind. To reject either the critique of existing structures or the need to build anew would be devastating in a time of crisis when both these activities are sorely needed. Affirming construction without critique implies building for the sake of building without ascertaining what those structures are supposed to serve, thereby leaving potentially porous and dangerous foundations intact. Meanwhile, critique without construction implies indiscriminately tearing down all forms and structures, a goal which rejects the hard work of distinguishing between good and bad constructions.

An institution like the fossil economy has played a major role in producing the climate crisis. It would, however, be wrong to infer that all institutionalized forms of energy production are inherently damaging to the same extent. Of course, nobody would make this exact argument, but this hyperbolic example indicates the dangers of conflating particular forms with forms in general. Collective forms of self-legislation are necessary for sustaining human life, but because the nature of human metabolism is not pre-given, it is possible to build differently. Some historical manifestations of political forms, social institutions, and economic modes of production have undoubtedly proven oppressive, unjust, and damaging to more-than-human nature. But erasing qualitative distinctions inhibits the field for political action. To separate the wheat from the chaff requires formal analyses of how given structures enable different forms of life. Reading literature critically and constructively allows us to practice formal analyses of the constructedness of possible worlds to imagine how we may build anew in a time of crisis.

The two epigraphs used in this thesis neatly encapsulate the connection between true infinity and political formalism in the ecocritical context that I have tried to make explicit in

this thesis. The first epigraph is taken from Stephen A. Mitchell's gloss on a passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (1962: 62). It may not be a plausible reading of Nietzsche, but it is a great reading of Hegel. Setting aside the validity of Mitchell's Nietzsche interpretation, the triadic structure captures three possible ways of relating to both finitude and forms in a time of crisis. The built form in question is a sandcastle. The first approach resembles what Hegel calls bad infinity, a position which refuses to acknowledge that there exist any limits at all. Hence, a person following the first approach imagines that "his creations would last forever, totally oblivious to the incoming tide which will demolish his productions." The second approach, meanwhile, realizes that the buildings will eventually be destroyed. Yet the only reason to build would be if the buildings "are assured of immortality," which is impossible, meaning that no buildings are erected at all. This second approach resembles what Hegel calls the "unhappy consciousness," which devalues the transitoriness of this world compared to the timelessness of an otherworldly beyond. Finally, the third approach acknowledges that the transitoriness of life is the precondition for enjoying any activity at all. In Mitchell's words, "[t]he inevitable limitations of reality do not dim the passion with which he builds his castles; in fact, the inexorable realities add a poignancy and sweetness to his passion" (Mitchell 1988: 195). This third approach animates truly infinite forms of ecopolitics.

The second epigraph stems from Richard Powers's 2021 novel *Bewilderment*. Part of the novel revolves around a father and son examining simulated models of extraterrestrial life on fictional planets created by the father, an astrobiologist by profession. One of these planets is Tedia, where life is constantly at risk of extinction due to the planet's proximity to impending supernovas. Having reset the simulation 40 times, "the calm lasted long enough for civilization to take hold. […] But when their archaeologists revealed how often the world ended, and their astronomers figured out why, society broke down and destroyed itself, millennia before the next supernova would have" (Powers 2021: 151). These creatures cannot bear the thought of their own mortality and that their world will one day come to an end, entirely outside of their control. On restart number 1001, Tedian life nonetheless continues "assembling endless new platforms. It didn't know any better. It couldn't do otherwise" (Powers 2021: 151). Rather than lamenting that life will someday end, life persists. Hence, the "doomed tubular creatures" reassure the son: "*There are two kinds of 'endless.' Ours is the better one*" (Powers 2021: 152). Having acknowledged that finitude can be enabling, life on this planet survives, but not forever.

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