

## The (Non)Modern Imagination of a Noisy Williams

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**ABSTRACT** | This article investigates William Carlos Williams's philosophical investment in relational ways of knowing the world by re-reading the poems in his 1923 collection *Spring and All* through the lens of the poet's prose. Bringing into focus the noisy aesthetic aims that Williams outlines in the prose passages and that are at play in the poems themselves, *Spring and All* is read not for what it means but for how it means, taking noisy Williams at his word and asking not how poetic language represents but how it mediates. The article extends pragmatist approaches to Williams's poetry by turning to Bruno Latour's theory of (non)modernity and new media theories in order to articulate the poet's interest in the translations and exchanges that occur beneath the binaries that moderns have produced.

**KEYWORDS** | modernism, modernity, media theory, Latour, noise

William Carlos Williams's views of the relationship between the individual and the objects of experience is what interests me in this essay. Indeed, the poet's dictum, "No ideas but in things" (P 6) signals both his curiosity about objects and a commitment to developing a poetics of description. When thinking about Williams one cannot ignore "The Red Wheelbarrow," famous among critics for its direct and immediate presentation of physical reality. The poem's short but sustained consideration of the wheelbarrow's spatial location in relation to other objects—the white chickens—seemingly abnegates the speaker's voice so that the objects, in the words of J. Hillis Miller, "can begin to manifest themselves as they are" (7). Kristen Case describes this poetic strategy as the "anti-romantic presentation of the

particulars . . . that is closely aligned with Pound's imagism," a strategy that appears to be in contrast to the predominantly anti-mimetic prose passages in *Spring and All* that point not to objects beyond the page but to the words themselves (86). Bringing Case's clarity to bear on "The Red Wheelbarrow," we see this double-pull at play: even as the particularity of the red wheelbarrow appears prominent, we observe traces of the poem foregrounding itself as an object, and like the red wheelbarrow, possessing no meaning beyond itself. After all, the poem is organized around the image of a *vehicle* used to transport materials, reminding us that words too are vehicles—vehicles that carry meaning.<sup>1</sup>

In its thisness, "The Red Wheelbarrow" points to itself as an object that is part of nature, a view which may resonate with readers familiar with Ralph Waldo Emerson who in "The Poet" writes that "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing" (186).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the poet always puts something of himself into his poem, and the poem in turn puts something of itself into the world; this is the principle upon which Williams builds his poetic practice, a principle based on, as we learn from Case and others, the philosophical insights of John Dewey, for whom poems do not qualify as "corruptions" of nature, but are, instead, objects that interact with other objects, reminding us that what we know is at least in part a function of our knowledge-making practices.<sup>3</sup> In Deweyan terms, one might say that poems, like scientific inferences, are translations of experience "*of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature—stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on." He continues: "Things interacting in a certain way *are* experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object—the human organism—they are *how* things are experienced as well. Experience reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breath and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches" (*Experience and Nature* 4a-1).

I want here to explore Williams's own sense of Dewey's stretching of experience, that which hovers over the edge and moves beyond the surface constraints of personality, acting upon the individual embedded in a wider net of relations of objects and subjects.<sup>4</sup> For Williams, the poem is both what is experienced and how things are experienced; it puts itself in relation to the objects it presents, and in so doing, co-constructs experience. Poems are not just tools for knowing the world; they inscribe themselves

into what we know about the world, and unlike other discourses, foreground their artifice. They are noisy because what they say is not purified from how they say it. In *Spring and All*, Williams insists that he is modern, a label through which he affirms his commitment to artistic innovation and cultural progress; yet his noisy poetic practice implies the opposite. Reading the collection's poems alongside the prose passages reveals a writer with an ambivalent relationship to modernity—a writer who tests and probes the very grounds of what it means to be a “modern” poet.<sup>5</sup>



The form of *Spring and All* eludes easy categorization, and we see in its opening pages Williams ventriloquizing a sceptical critic who wonders whether he is reading poetry at all. Published in 1923, Williams's collection opens with the brutal accusation that modern poetry is “antipoetry”:

‘I do not like your poems; you have no faith whatever. You seem neither to have suffered nor, in fact, to have felt anything very deeply. There is nothing appealing in what you say but on the contrary the poems are positively repellent. They are heartless, cruel, they make fun of humanity. What in God’s name do you mean? Are you a pagan? Have you no tolerance for human frailty? Rhyme you may perhaps take away but rhythm! why there is none in your work whatever. Is this what you call poetry? It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which you are bent. Poetry that used to go hand in hand with life, poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation. You moderns! it is the death of poetry that you are accomplishing.’ (CP1 177)

The critic’s emphasis on the lack of rhythm in this passage suggests an intriguing connection between form and modernity. For the critic, the issue boils down to a lack of rhythm and a perceived lack of empathy for “human frailty.” Williams will have much to say about whether something as superficial as rhythm is an essential property of poetry, and about the association of poetry with feeling deeply. As *Spring and All* comes to an end, he devotes many of the prose passages to uncovering the difference between poetry and prose, and while he gives no straightforward answers

to the distinction, the one he ultimately does offer is intriguing: poetry and prose differ in their intention, in their point of origin.

For Williams, the form of prose “depends on clarity. If prose is not accurately adjusted to the exposition of facts it does not exist—Its form is that alone. To penetrate everywhere with enlightenment” (CP1 226). The form of poetry, on the other hand, “has to do with the crystallization of the imagination—the perfection of new forms as additions to nature.” Indeed, there is a qualitative difference between prose and poetry, and the difference turns on the former’s reliance on argument and clarity, on the exposition of facts. Williams writes just a few passages earlier that living entails fixing categories, dividing “[t]he curriculum of knowledge [. . .] into the sciences, the thousand and one groups of data, scientific, philosophic or whatnot” (224). In this formulation, prose is one means by which the fixed categories hold when life is divided into the various curriculums of knowledge.

In poetry, “[t]he same things exist, but in a different condition when energized by the imagination,” writes Williams, in order to argue that a proper education presents facts not “as dead dissections,” but fully contextualized within “the nature of the force which may energize it” (224). Echoing Dewey’s assertion in *Democracy and Education* that education should guard against the separation of knowledge from experience, Williams reminds the reader that reality depends upon imagination, “a cleavage through everything by a force that does not exist in the mass and therefore can never be discovered by its anatomization” (225). Everything that we know is cloaked by imagination—its reality, in fact, depends upon it.

The difference, then, between prose and poetry, seems to depend on poetic form, expressed as Alec Marsh writes, through poetic measure. For Williams, measure is how we know reality: “The one thing that the poet has not wanted to change, the one thing he has clung to in his dream—unwilling to let go— [. . .] is structure. Here we are immovable. But here is precisely where we come into contact with reality. Reluctant we waken from our dreams. And what is reality? How do we know reality? The only reality we can know is MEASURE” (SE 283). Quoting the above, Marsh states that Williams insists that the poem needs a new measure—one that is “austere and direct . . . yet flexible” instead of one that uses the old forms that are the measure of the past and that have nothing to do with the economic, social, and political situation of the present (66–7).<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, Williams chooses to include both prose and poetry in his collection in order to satisfy the tendency of prose to “penetrate everywhere with enlightenment” and the tendency of poetry to remind readers

of “the endlessness of knowledge” (CP1 225). The critic’s limitation is in reading the poetry, we are reminded, to the exclusion of the prose passages where the poet does lead us to new discoveries. But these discoveries are incomplete without the verse passages which remind us of the artifice upon which these new discoveries depend. These discoveries lead not to novelty that is associated with progress, but to a different kind of novelty—the novelty that adorns nature with new things. The double pull embodied by the collection itself represents the tendency of modernity to separate life from imagination, or knowledge from experience, even as the two are inextricably linked in practice.

Thus, while the critic appears bent upon poetry that turns the reader inward and leads her to discovery, Williams is after poetry that uncovers, that infinitely stretches outward and bridges the rift between mind and world—the kind of poetry that leaves one feeling naked. “Perhaps this noble apostrophe means something terrible to me,” writes the poet, “but for the moment I interpret it to say: ‘You have robbed me. God, I am naked. What shall I do?’” (CP1 177) Such a prospect promises to be frightening because it entails questioning familiar categories, concepts, and modes of knowing. Once fantasy is no longer available as a safe refuge, our notions of modernity become visible as myths. We can “separate things of the imagination from life” (194); we can wave our “great weapons”: “science,” “philosophy,” and “art” (185); we can search after “the beautiful illusion” which keeps up “the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe” (178); we can attribute the advancement of civilization to the technologies and specialized knowledges that we have produced; but, ultimately, Williams argues, this “beautiful illusion” does not describe what we are in the moment.<sup>7</sup> No wonder the critic asks the poet whether he is “a pagan.”

### **The Middle Kingdom**

“This is its book,” writes the poet. Curiously, Williams addresses his collection to the imagination, the name that he gives to experience.<sup>8</sup> Imagination is both a medium and the force that powers the infrastructure of modernity; it is the creative energy that makes plants grow and keeps nature in constant motion; it is what makes objects and subjects and what connects them. Williams’s imagination is the animating energy that processes the material translations and mediations proliferating beneath our modern predisposition to sort through the “multiformity” of life (CP1 189) into

binary oppositions: nature and culture, subject and object, life and imagination. Many of the prose passages in *Spring and All* are concerned with how to represent this life force, and Williams appropriately depicts it as an embodied, creaturely Sphinx perched on a mountaintop, reigning over what Bruno Latour in *We Have Never Been Modern* will come to refer to as, the “Middle Kingdom.”

The Middle Kingdom is where the “quasi-objects” or the monstrous hybrids proliferate. They are the bottom half of the Modern Constitution, the top of which conceives of nature and society as two separate domains. Paradoxically, according to Latour, the further apart nature and society are kept from each other, the greater the number of hybrids that proliferate at the bottom, resulting in a difference between past and present civilizations that is quantifiable. We can measure, in other words, the degree to which a society is modern based on the number of hybrids that we use to perform the work of translation at the top of the constitution: “The modern constitution as a whole had already declared that there is no common measure between the world of subjects and the world of objects, but that same Constitution at once cancelled out the distance by practicing the contrary, [ . . . ] by multiplying mediators in the guise of intermediaries” (59). These natural-social hybrids, monsters, or quasi-objects, are “real, quite real, and we humans have not made them.” He continues:

But they are collective because they attach us to one another, because they circulate in our hands and define our social bond by their very circulation. They are discursive, however; they are narrated, historical, passionate, and peopled with actants of autonomous forms. They are unstable and hazardous, existential, and never forget Being. This liason of the four repertoires in the same networks once they are officially represented allows us to construct a dwelling large enough to house the Middle Kingdom, the authentic common home of the nonmodern world as well as its Constitution. (89)

Latour’s compelling hypothesis is that these four repertoires are applied at later stages by the moderns—the legislators of the Modern Constitution (among them, Williams’s critic)—who reduce existence either to physical matter, social construction, discursive play, or mere being, when in fact they are, in practice, a bit of each. Quasi-objects are natural, social, and

discursive, and to be modern is to sieve through the multiformity of life and uphold one of the repertoires over the other. Thus, Boyd's vacuum is treated as an instrument of detection by scientists, a socially-constructed artifact by historians, and a discursive object by literary critics, when in fact it is all those things at once: it "traces the spring of air," "sketches in seventeenth-century society" and "defines a new literary genre, that of the account of the laboratory experiment" (Latour 9). Crucially, then, the essence of Boyd's vacuum cannot be narrowed down to any one of its functions but rather is embodied in the natural-social relations in which it participates; its essence are the structural and measurable trajectories that link its material, social, discursive, and phenomenal functions—the media formations that quite literally fabricate the modern world.

Williams is uniquely positioned to witness and describe the work of purification and hybridization of modernity as a poet. In addressing the collection to the imagination, he re-ties the Gordian knot that has been undone by the corporatization of labor, the institutionalization of education and the sciences, and the professionalization of the arts. In *Spring and All*, Williams is interested in the traffic across all domains of life that imagination enables between science and literature, poem and world, reader and poet, and in one fell swoop, shows us that it is we who, in alliance with the quasi-objects of the Middle Kingdom, have constructed the modern world, as he imagines a future when the barriers we have put up to purify imagination from life become visible.

In this context, to cast "The Wheelbarrow" as an example of Williams's developing poetics of description is both accurate and misplaced. Indeed, for Williams the poem "must be real, not 'realism' but reality itself" (CP1 204) but it is not to purify objects from experience so that they "can begin to manifest themselves as they are" since that would make Williams complicit in the project of modernity, a project that in the early moments of his modernist manifesto he depicts as a "wild horse racing in an illimitable pampa under the stars" toward "that majestic progress of life [. . .] with blinding rapidity, though we do not have the time to notice it" (182). If we could only but slow down this progress, and pause to contemplate the moment when spring approaches, when "everything is fresh, perfect, and recreated," we might discover the underbelly of modernity that fabricates modern specialized discourses and institutionalized social practices. It is no coincidence then that in the prose passages Williams focuses on our discovery of the terms "veracity," "actuality," "real," "natural," and "sincere" anew, words that participate in the

production of modernity by being attached to a mimetic artistic tradition that relegate art to a separate domain from the “natural” and the “real” (181).

If we have struggled to explain “The Red Wheelbarrow” within the context of the poet’s prose at all, it is because in foregrounding the transgressive work of the imagination—it is, after all, “drunk with prohibitions” (183)—the poet calls into question the possibility that he can ever free the world from the imagination; for to free it from its playful artifice is to recreate once again the “perfect plagiarism” that art in its search for “the beautiful illusion” enacts and that the “modern” poet—if we insist on calling him that—wants to avoid. As modernist manifesto, *Spring and All*’s message is loud and clear: art that merely represents in perfect likeness the world which it describes using old forms, brings about the death, not of poetry but of life: it involves a mini apocalypse, step by step a repetition of “EVOLUTION,” as the poet shouts, “from amoeba to the highest type of intelligence . . . duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that preceded in the dead ages gone by” (181). The result is not a world anew in which the poet can articulate the fullness and “oneness” of experience, but a blinding progress that “seems stillness itself in the mass of its movements” (182), a stillness and lifelessness that turns the imagination “into a stone within whose heart an egg, unlaidd, remained hidden” (181).

The apocalyptic rhetoric in the opening of *Spring and All* is revealing for what it tells us about our critical pre-disposition to be “modern” in Latour’s sense; for, in order to understand “The Red Wheelbarrow” as a transparent medium that reveals the world to us as it is, we have to overlook the manifesto which contains it and whose purpose is to save the imagination from the very critical apparatus that asks us to read the poem as exclusively performing the work of purification. Like Boyd’s air vacuum and Galileo’s telescope, “The Red Wheelbarrow” continues to be thought to produce a pure discourse: one in which objects reveal themselves as they are. If our point of departure is to read the poem using a modern critical apparatus, we will continue missing the transgressive work Williams wishes to enact in this and other poems in the collection: one that strives toward impurity<sup>9</sup> by tracing the material-semiotic networks that makeup the infrastructure of modernity.

I propose we read *Spring and All* not for what it means but for how it means,<sup>10</sup> that we take noisy Williams at his word and ask not how poetic language represents but how it mediates, a move that I consider to be crucial in demonstrating the extent to which Williams’s poetics of description does not seek to collapse the subject-object, nature-culture, and mind-world



binaries so much as to make them visible. By tracking the media formations that produce these binaries, this essay re-reads the poems in *Spring and All* through the lens of the poet's prose in order to bring into focus the noisy aesthetic aims that Williams outlines in the prose passages and that are at play in the poems themselves. To that end, I see Bruno Latour's theory of (non)modernity and new media theories as extending pragmatist approaches in their evaluation of the formal aspects of extra-textual networks. In particular, Latour's *Modern Constitution* provides a good conceptual model for articulating the work of purification that the poems perform, while new media theories give us the conceptual toolkit to describe the particular forms these media formations take.

A narratology of material networks, new media theories share in common with actor-network theory their interest both in theories of noise and the epistemological assumptions upon which they are based: that the bifurcations of society and nature, mind and world, object and subject are produced by media, and that we do not discover knowledge about the world but rather construct it by enlisting the help of the monstrous hybrids that, to return to Latour, we are paradoxically in the habit of banishing. New media theories—particularly in the work of Katherine N. Hayles, Joseph Vogl, and Bernhardt Siegert—also borrow from and extend the concept of noise from Michel Serres's *The Parasite*, where he argues that noise interrupts the flow of information and messages that both sustain social networks and that are not consciously recognized as media formations.

*The Parasite* opens with an invitation from a city to a country rat to share in the leftovers of a farmer's meal. The meal is cut short, however, when they hear a loud noise. Serres writes, "It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information. A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order" (3). The new order generated by the parasite echoes some of Williams's prose passages where he emphasizes that in the imagination's domain, things exist in a different condition. For Serres, this new condition of disorder and chaos is the "whirlwind" of hybrids about which Latour writes where things do not correspond to the neat categories into which they have been sorted at the top of the *Constitution* (46).

Throughout the book, Serres draws attention to both the processes of communication (which include material exchanges of information such as a creaky door that is interpreted as "danger" by the scurrying rats) and the material networks that carry the messages which can be detected by

following the noisy trail they leave behind. The parasites, Serres continues, are the “abusive guest, an unavoidable animal, a break in a message. In English this constellation does not exist: a break in a message is called static, from a different semantic field” (8). The noisy, parasitical inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom proliferate beneath the system and form the material networks that order the multiformity of life; but they themselves do not obey the laws which they produce; they reverse, reshuffle, and cross over binaries; they are transgressive, “like a cancer of interceptions, flights, losses, holes, trapdoors.” Crucially, these monstrous hybrids are not just appendages to a system, but are “quite simply the system itself [. . .] the obscure opposite of conscious and clear organization, happening behind everyone’s back, the dark side of a system” (12).

The challenge, Serres implies, is how to theorize about noise, especially in a language that lacks the semantic constellation of parasitology. In particular, the concept of noise connotes sound in the English language whereas Serres means to suggest something more akin to Marshall McLuhan’s, “the medium is the message.”<sup>11</sup> In both cases, they refer to traces of the medium as a material object. In *The Parasite*, Serres seeks to track the media formations that carry out the pre-categorical and pre-linguistic semiotic exchanges that escape our conscious attention. Doing so allows him to not only apply the concept of noise to any medium, but to also describe more accurately the media ecology we inhabit. New media theorists have taken it upon themselves to extend Serres’s aim.

Hayles, for instance, applies the concept of noise to print and Vogl to scientific instruments. For both, noise encompasses any elements that draw attention to the formal features of the medium in question, even if only briefly. For example, we know microbes by observing them through the lens of a microscope, but the zoom and focus functions and the speck of dust on its lens point to its materiality and its functionality, with the effect of interrupting the immediacy of looking through the instrument. Instead of discovering microbes, the act of translation is uncovered, it becomes palpable. It is the equivalent of seeing the window as an object that separates the inside and the outside as opposed to as a transparent glass through which we see the world. Perhaps a crack in the window distorts some object we are looking at, or dust clouds the view, but in both cases the window as a medium interrupts the act of looking through it.

Similarly, the printed text is also noisy. Headings, table of contents, folds on the page, stains, a typo, italics, they all function parasitically in the

medium of print. Williams's dashes, words in ALL CAPS, sentence fragments, and paragraph breaks all make his prose passages noisy. So do poetic devices such as metaphors.<sup>12</sup> We have already seen that Williams's red wheelbarrow is not just an object but a structural metaphor that points to the specific ways that poetry mediates.<sup>13</sup> It is in this sense that Williams's *Spring and All* is noisy and ultimately nonmodern. It goes without saying that all texts mediate, but what makes Williams's poetry particularly noisy are the moments when his writing folds in on itself like a Möbius strip, crossing over, reversing, and reshuffling its material, social, rhetorical, and representational functions.<sup>14</sup> By bringing to light these moments in *Spring and All*, we uncover Williams's commitment to a poetics of "noise,"<sup>15</sup> a project that foregrounds the material-semiotic trajectories that connect text to its context, and that the poet generates in the prose passages in *Spring and All*.

### Noisy Williams

Leaving aside the "larger processes of the imagination" (CP1 210) to which Williams devotes *Spring and All*, Williams's critics are frequently occupied with the question of whether the poet embraces or rejects a mind-world dualism. Yet Williams's imagination, like Dewey's concept of experience, is the connective tissue between mind and world, and it is not expressive of personality; rather, it has much more in common with modernist conceptions of impersonality,<sup>16</sup> which, according to Cuddy-Keane et al, were used by some writers (chiefly T.S. Eliot, Henry James, William Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, among others) to convey the notion of a diffusive, extended self as connected to the outer world (159). Defining modernist impersonality as collective mind, they also describe alternative figurations of impersonality in the modernist period as masculinist, objective, abstract, detached, distant, fair, impartial, mechanical, depersonalized, and lacking emotion (159–60).<sup>17</sup> As we see in what follows, Williams's imagination has a complementary relationship to the externalist iterations of modernist impersonality discussed in *Modernism: Keywords*. Indeed, in *Spring and All* Williams is not concerned with the self or the collective mind but with articulating the noisy dimensions of modern experience.

Described variously in *Spring and All* as an immaterial "force, an electricity or a medium, a place" (CP1 235), the imagination emerges in the collection as a creaturely sphinx who poses "the old unanswerable question" (184) to the poet, and it is its noisy processes which interest us here. Though Williams

will go on to define the imagination without resorting to “mysticism”—a tendency which, by the poet’s own admission, “holds back” the knowledge which he seeks (207)—he nonetheless portrays it as a material entity, drawing attention both to the imagination’s separateness from psychological introversion and its active role in generating “the condition of a place” in which poetry emerges (235).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the imagination is the answer to the difficulty of self-expression, and the answer is itself Emersonian: by performing the role of a “cornucopia/of glass,” (187) or, in the words of Emerson, the role of “a suction pipe through which the world flows” (“Perpetual Forces” 293), the poet transcribes the imagination’s noisy compositional processes.

The imagination’s separateness from the poet’s personality does not, however, entail her separateness from reality. In fact, just as for Dewey experience is *of* as well as *in* nature, for Williams, the imagination is *of* as well as *in* reality. In the poet’s words: “the imagination is wrongly understood when it is supposed to be a removal from reality in the sense of John of Gaunt’s speech in *Richard the Second*: to imagine possession of that which is lost. It is rightly understood when John of Gaunt’s words are related not to their sense as objects adherent to his son’s welfare or otherwise but as a dance over the body of his condition accurately accompanying it” (CP1 235). Describing the play of words as a “dance over the body,” in this passage Williams grounds categorical thinking on corporeal experience, for words do not exist in a separate domain from but are rather rooted in experience, semiotically connecting our embodied thoughts to external reality. Williams conceives of semiosis as a dance or a performance staged by the imagination in concert with our corporeal existence because, in his view, signification is not a deterministic process. Indeed, even though successful signification requires common experience of the world—in fact, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, the meanings of signs are constrained by the objects to which they refer—our conceptual categories are not fixed; they can be renewed.<sup>19</sup> Words can take on new meanings that more accurately describe nature because imagination is embedded in the world, always performing its dance over our bodies, activating and re-shuffling semiotic crossings between the domains of nature and culture.<sup>20</sup>

In order to illustrate these crossings, Williams’s poem III (186) takes as its subject the poet as a “farmer in deep thought,” a figure with which we are familiar in the woods of Walden Pond. The poem depicts a farmer pacing in the rain among his “blank fields,” metaphorically alluding to the poet’s blank page and the potential to fill it with the seeds of his thoughts. Set in a dark

day in March, when presumably the farmer's seedlings have not yet yielded crops—if indeed, he has even begun planting—the poet suggests that artistic composition shares the same common origin with agricultural cultivation since they both draw their materials from the domain of experience. However, the poem also intimates that the crops of the farmer and the artist might be different in kind. Ending with the looming threat of an adversary, “Down past the brushwood/brisling by/the rainsluiced wagonroad/looms the artist figure of/the farmer—composing /—antagonist”, the poem disrupts the promise of harmony between nature and culture with which it began. Not only do the generation of thoughts compete with the manual labor that will yield crops—for, it is on account of a cold rainy day that the farmer is prevented from pulling the “brownd weeds,” “leaving room for thought”—but agricultural seeds are predetermined to yield one particular crop. Artistic composition, on the other hand, generates a multiplicity of meanings when actualized or performed by a reader and so depends on its being interpreted for its thoughts to come to fruition.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that as the collection approaches the end, Williams seems dissatisfied with his figuration of the imagination as a sphinx. We feel his frustration as he struggles to move beyond mystical notions of agency, beyond the romantic metaphysics of traditional forms of art, all of which serve to perpetuate the myth that artistic composition is a process detached from the world we live in. Writing in a secular and industrial context, Williams prefers, finally, the metaphors of “energy” and “electricity,” both of which approach what he wishes to convey about the imagination's processes more accurately; for, not only do they communicate the inextricability of the medium's noise from its message, but they also allude to the imagination's semiotic play in the domains of both nature and culture. Since electricity is a natural source of energy without which it would be impossible to power the machinery of modernity, as a metaphor it allows Williams to maintain that “Composition is in no essential an escape from life”:

In fact if it is so it is negligible to the point of insignificance. Whatever “life” the artist may be forced to lead has no relation to the vitality of his compositions. Such names as Homer, the blind; Scheherazade, who lived under threat—Their compositions have as their excellence an identity with life since they are as actual, as sappy as the leaf of the tree which never moves from one spot.

[. . .]

The work will be in the realm of imagination as plain as the sky is to a fisherman—A very clouded sentence. The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole—aware—civilized. (CP1 189)

Williams here invokes a familiar Peircean formulation: that poems draw their identity from life—that is, that they convey the qualitative aspects of experience, of nature, of the objects with which we come in contact. At the same time, poems are the products of culture because they are symbolic translations of nature. Words are symbols that either capture some qualitative aspect of experience or point to an object in the world. Words are also part of nature precisely because of what makes them useful as symbols: they can be replicated, written down, and spoken, and in that process of repetition acquire their peculiar status as objects *other than* what they represent.<sup>21</sup> Though poems might seem lifeless and detached from life, the organic and “sappy” current of the imagination runs through them. Indeed, because words are not to be put down just as symbols of nature but as “part” and “cognizant” of the whole, it is possible for the poet to declare that a sentence is “very clouded.” Such a sentence is one in which each word is “aware” of both its mimetic function and its status as a conventional symbol. Words are “civilized” and noisy not only because they do not signify nature transparently, but because they are a part of another whole: the poem which contains more of those clouded sentences that draw attention to themselves, to the qualitative aspects of experience which they iconically present, and to their inextricability from the meanings which they produce.

For Williams, the poem is the point of contact between nature and culture, the middle ground of—even as it simultaneously processes—that distinction. To be in a Williams poem is to become intensely aware of how conceptual boundaries are processed, which is how we can come to call the world out there *our* world. For Williams, experience of the world is processed by our corporeal, poetic, and technological bodies, and it is in this sense that we can think of Williams’s poetry as performing a proto-media theory of sorts—one in which it is possible for poems to reach beyond mimesis, beyond simulation. Williams discusses the sense of “completion” and “actuality” to which he aspires, and he explicitly refers to such a sense not in terms of “representation” since “much may be represented actually, but of separate existence” (CP1 204). To reach beyond representation entails a shift from

writing and reading as if poems were lifeless objects to thinking about poems as participating in media events or media constellations, by which Joseph Vogl means the interaction among objects and subjects that produce what we know about the world. These processes point to the media formations in place that connect reader to text, writer to world, and imagination to life.

Williams's poetic practice foregrounds poetic noise and captures the tactile, material qualities of language which the poem can trigger. For instance, poem XIII (211–2) emphasizes noise over meaning, causing readers to read associatively and to look for structural patterns of sounds and images. Beginning in a natural and sensuous scene—a group of aquatic arthropods resting on a rock formation overtop of the sea—Williams juxtaposes and intersperses it with cultural—and more specifically urban—images, in order to show the knotted relationship between nature and culture. The arthropods do not rest on top of the rock intact and untouched by the economic and social infrastructure of culture. Rather, Williams points to their place within a larger network of “sweaty kitchens,” presumably the same kitchens belonging to the urban sprawl that gives rise to the “Waves of steel”—an apt description of the movement of motorcars “swarming backstreets.” The assonance of the words also draws attention to yet another type of coherence, drawing together the likeness of the crunching and thrusting of “Crustaceous,” “sweaty,” and “sea” with the natural raw materials that power the industrial infrastructure of the domain of modern culture: “steel” and “electricity.”

The networks and patterns that Williams activates in poem XIII show the convergence of industrial and natural processes and function as metaphors of the noisy processes of the imagination, which, so far, Williams has also cast as belonging to the natural and cultural domains. Interestingly, Williams returns to the nature-culture “knits” in the same poem—the domain of art—and, more specifically, the work of renaissance Spanish painter El Greco. In this moment, Williams juxtaposes the poem's staccato pounding of the “t”s and “p”s to the image of the speckled lights on the lakes, whose romantic hues, culminating in the image of a “renaissance/twilight,” are ironically referred to as the “nitrogen/of old pastures” broken up by the line breaks and pulverized by the triphammers. In this moment, the poem itself pounds, breaks up, and pulverizes the old trope of holding a mirror up to nature, in order to clear space for new pastures, for new artistic forms.

Implicitly, the protean figure of Persephone emerges in this industrial context, engendering the (agri)cultural processes of crunching and

grinding—to the poem’s noise—, at the same time as she problematizes the distinctions between nature and culture which traditional art modes disseminate. The result is an “untamed” aggregation of words that, like the cluster of arthropods resting on the wedge between rock and sea waves, borders on semantic nonsense, echoing Henry David Thoreau’s effort to preserve the wildness of language in “Walking”:

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library,—aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature. (232)

Notwithstanding the poem’s reaching toward Thoreau’s sense of words “nailed” to “their primitive senses” and “transplanted” from the earth to the page, and notwithstanding Williams’s own reaching toward a poetic mode that “expands like the buds at the approach of spring,” blooming and bearing fruit “for the faithful reader,” there is a looming threat in the poem—the threat of permanence evoked by the images of the “agonized spires” and “bridge stanchions” resting “certainly.” The agony of stasis and lifelessness, concentrated on various forms of urban fixtures, is finally juxtaposed to the movement at the beginning of the poem, betraying the poet’s worry that the poem might not be read by a faithful reader, that it might sit and collect dust in a library. At the same time, that anxiety is ultimately eased, albeit violently, with the image of the “piercing/left ventricles”. The poem, when finally read, pierces the heart and reaches into the world of the reader with “long/sunburnt fingers”—the long fingers of the poet-farmer “in deep thought” (CP1 186), those same long fingers that have prepared the old pastures for new growth with the thumping hammers of the typewriter, and that inscribe the world of motorcars with “new forms” (198), with the products of the imagination.



Williams sustains his interest in the crossings that occur beneath the Modern Constitution, but not without attending to the work of purification that the monstrous hybrids perform. For example, poem X (204–5) foregrounds the perspectival nature of seeing, making perception itself visible as an act of mediation by means of the “eyeglasses” which “see everything and remain/related to mathematics.” The question remains whether the eyeglasses exemplify, in the words of Vogl, “how vision is itself an optical distortion” and how “sensory perception is based on sensory deception” (18). Indeed, the eyeglasses are designed to filter out the static of poor vision so that we might arrive at knowledge about the world, and in this way they distort our perception. Yet, the “eyeglasses” are also semiotic objects related to mathematics, not so much because they deceive our senses, but because they represent—by means of distortion—some true quality or aspect of the world. Crucially, Williams is not denying the representational function of these perception-enhancing instruments, and in this way he diverges from the implicit epistemological assumptions of contemporary new media theories. By choosing to emphasize the eyeglasses’ purifying function instead, Williams implies that our epistemologies about the world do not just entail discovering facts as if media gave us unmediated access to the world.

It is precisely because the epistemology of mimetic representation is not in question but rather its purifying tendencies that the poet takes it upon himself to denature our knowledge-making practices. Williams’s poem X reveals the extent to which epistemology necessarily involves acts of creative world-building in partnership with the noisy monstrous hybrids we are in the habit of banishing. For this reason, he focuses our attention not just on the materiality of the eyeglasses, but also on the semiotic structures that yield the epistemologies that compose the modern world. To be sure, lying there, “with the gold/earpieces folded down,” much remains to be discovered by our interaction with the eyeglasses. Yet, Williams also draws attention both to the chemical-industrial processes that transform the raw materials of nature into a “brown celluloid” frame—celluloid being the first type of thermoplastic—and to the artistic processes that allow celluloid to “represent tortoiseshell.” In a noisy poem where everything recalls or represents something else—“the candy/with melon flowers”—another nature-culture knot—“proclaiming without accent/the quality of the farmer’s/shoulders and his daughter’s/accidental skin”—the poet focuses our attention both on the material that composes their frame and on the cultural techniques<sup>22</sup> that produce them, and by implication, the modern world as we know it.

Understood as media, the pair of eyeglasses purify what we see from how we see when we use them—that is, they erase themselves when we use them as if they had not been involved at all in sharpening and focusing our vision. By drawing attention to the compositional processes of the eyeglasses, Williams emphasizes their material form, with the effect of interrupting the perceptual immediacy of looking through them. Implicitly, the poet suggests, poems can also interrupt their mimetic function by pointing to their own noisy formations. Indeed, much like the red wheelbarrow that opened this essay, the eyeglasses also produce a kind of recursive self-referentiality in the act of reading, and in so doing, they point to the poem's own processes of purification as the objects which it makes visible come out of focus. By highlighting the various actans involved—all the bodies, ideologies, aesthetic modes, and political, industrial and economic processes that interact to produce all the natural-cultural artifacts among which we live—the poet betrays his own interest in the ontological status of media as being prior to the distinctions they help to process.<sup>23</sup> It is in this crucial sense that the new poetic practice to which Williams aspires emphasizes not the poem's representational but its purifying functions, whereby the commonplace view that it might distort the world is not as interesting as how it produces a new epistemology—one in which acts of seeing and subjective interactions with media are integral to how we understand what reality is, and our relation to it.

The obsolete rose in an unnumbered/untitled poem (CP1 195–6) from the same collection is another unexpected example of an object participating in the media event of the poem. By foregrounding the difficult task of signifying a rose as a real object in the world without the heavy symbolism which it carries—the “weight of love”—the poet juxtaposes the indexical with the mimetic functions of the word which serve to convey the idea of a rose. If, in the poet's words, “to engage roses/becomes a geometry,” it is because of the semiotic processes in which the rose as an icon partakes, beginning with the edges of its petals idealized in “the grooved/columns of air” that then get etched “in metal or porcelain,” and in the “sharper, neater, more cutting/figured in majolica” of a “broken plate.” The representation of a rose is both an end in itself and the beginning of its signification as its sharp, geometrical edges give way to the love that waits, as its essential qualities—fragile, plucked, moist, half-raised, cold, precise, touching—combine with the reader's own experiences of its fragility and moistness. Indeed, “from the petal's edge a line starts” the process of

linguistic signification, “that being of steel,” enabling the concept of the rose to penetrate other worlds, “the Milky Way/without contact.” Williams dramatizes the poem’s ability to “penetrate spaces” in unexpected ways by calling attention to the chains of signification in which the concept of the rose partakes. At the same time, the poem itself generates the transformation of the rose from seedling to flower right before our eyes as it interacts with the steel point of the pen and the reader’s preconceived notions of and experiences with a rose. The rose-as-sign momentarily empties itself of meaning and of referent, making its materiality and noise visible to us, with the effect of bringing us closer to the particularity of the object to which it refers: the poet’s loving yet peculiar presentation of an obsolete rose.

### **The Embodiment of Knowledge**

“The primitives are not back in some remote age,” writes Williams. “They are not BEHIND experience” (CP1 220). For the poet, time neither moves forward or backward; instead, it stands still, it “does not move. Only ignorance and stupidity move.” For the poet, we never advance ahead of the past because we are polytemporal in Latour’s sense; we repurpose technologies that have been around for centuries and use them alongside more “modern” technologies. Such mixing of temporalities does not make us “an ethnographic curiosity”; it makes us, rather, quite ordinary and nonmodern in our daily lives.<sup>24</sup>

Williams’s response to modernity departs from Dewey’s in key ways, even as their views about formal education overlap. In the opening of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey deals at length with the importance of the transmission of knowledge, lest the “civilized group” relapses “into barbarism and then into savagery” (4). It is institutionalized education practices, in other words, that in Dewey’s estimation sets more civilized societies apart from so-called savage ones. Formal education is the means by which “all the resources and achievements of a complex society” are transmitted. “It also opens a way,” writes Dewey, “to a kind of experience which would not be accessible to the young, if they were left to pick up their training in informal association with others, since books and the symbols of knowledge are mastered” (9). The issue for Dewey, then, is the “dangers” posed by formal education in more “advanced” societies; they are, chiefly, that “formal instruction [. . .] easily becomes remote and dead—abstract and bookish . . . What accumulated knowledge exists in low grade societies is at

least put into practice . . . There is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience" (9–10).

In a similar vein, Williams writes that "the fixed categories into which life is divided must always hold. These things are normal—essential to every activity. But they exist—but not as dead dissections" (CP1 224). For Williams, as for Dewey, when education becomes abstracted from experience, it ceases to be a social good. Because "at present knowledge is placed before man as if it were a stair at the top of which a DEGREE is obtained" (224), writes the poet, "the effect will be to give importance to the sub-divisions of experience—which today are absolutely lost" (226). Hyper-specialization leads to ignorance because people become unaware of the bigger context in which formal education takes place; because of the narrowing of the world to the sub-divisions of experience that ensues when education ceases to be noisy, when it is not attuned to the "oneness of experience."

Perhaps because Dewey is a philosopher and Williams is a poet that they disagree, ultimately, about the modernizing effects of education. For Dewey, without formal education more advanced societies would relapse to primitivism, whereas for Williams, formal education is not a means for progress. As I have argued throughout this essay, Williams's poetic practice shares more in common with Latour's theory of nonmodernity because of his emphasis on the operations of the imagination on all domains of what he calls "life." In the poet's words, "It is for this reason that I have always placed art first and esteemed it over science—in spite of everything" (CP1 225). Formal education is not just a means to discover facts but also the product of increased hybridization at the bottom of the Constitution. Williams's poetic sensibility toward education entails awareness of how knowledge is constructed and is therefore more alert to how knowledge affects conscious life.<sup>25</sup>

It is tempting to attribute Williams's efforts to raise the poet above the scientist as a cultural authority to his own particular type of purification—and here I do not think the poet would disagree. Indeed, in order to function in the world we must sieve through the multiformity of life. True that being nonmodern entails practicing the same critical distance that makes moderns the enforcers of the constitution; and true that any act of knowledge-making involves the work of purification. For Williams, however, it matters a great deal that we at least be aware. It also matters that Williams's own meditations about the imagination leads him backward not forward in time.

Which explains why Shakespeare emerges at the end of the collection as a hero—perhaps even an Emersonian representative man—whose powers “PURELY of the imagination” set him apart from the plagiarizers: “his buoyancy of imagination raised him NOT TO COPY them [the scientists], not to holding the mirror up to them but to equal, to surpass them as a creator of knowledge, as a vigorous, living force above their heads” (CP1 209). By connecting communities of readers across time, Shakespeare’s work reveals itself, hundreds of years later, to be a living force above our heads, surpassing science in the production of knowledge. In the end, if Williams conceives of the imagination as a medium of transmission with the power to connect across time and transfuse its energy from generation to generation, reading is the activity that completes this process of transfusion and allows for imagination’s self-generation and self-articulation. In contrast to formal education which in Williams’s estimation is static, anatomized, and passive, the school of Shakespeare reminds us that we, as readers, also have the potential to participate in and cultivate the meaning-making machinery of poetry. Knowledge in this sense is embodied because it is dynamic, inclusive, and lives in the imagination of a distributed network of readers, writers, and monstrous hybrids. Williams reframes knowledge from process of discovery to embodied practice, transforming education from passive consumption of information to an activity that is participatory and responsive to the practical needs of the community.

Williams’s conception of the poem as a knowledge-producing machine that not only rivals but outperforms scientific practices is striking, because the knowledge produced by the poem is embodied,<sup>26</sup> because the pure effect of poetry, in the words of the poet, is the very embodiment of “the force upon which science depends for its reality” (CP1 225). Rather than diminishing the importance of science, Williams proposes that science is possible because we live in a world that is dynamic and that changes, a world in which nature’s poesis—those endless acts of generation and self-generation, the “stony moments” that “are still sparkling and animated! [. . .] [and] streaming” (Emerson, “The Poet” 186)—depends on the same creative impulses that motivate our own poetic acts and our own knowledge practices. The embodiment of knowledge into a “living current” is that “which it has always sought” (CP1 225); it is science’s next step if it is to not only fully account for the proliferation of hybrids that comprise “experience,” but if it is also to become responsive to the needs of the social at the bottom of the Modern Constitution. In making explicit poetry’s

vital contribution to the production of embodied knowledge, Williams foregrounds the power of poetry to alter readers' sense-perceptions and enact conceptual shifts of equal if not greater proportions to those brought about by Galileo's telescope.



We began this essay by identifying one reader, the modern critic engaged in policing what counts as poetry and for whom formal experimentation signals the end of poetry. But here I wish to end with another one, the ideal reader that Williams invokes: "In the imagination, we are henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say 'I' I mean also 'you.' And so, together, as one, we shall begin" (CP1 178). In this instance, the imagination is not only the connective tissue between author and reader, but it transforms the reader into the author of the poem's meanings. Reading is defined as a participatory, dynamic, and collective activity since it involves not emotional immersion but attention to the poems' noisy structures which are *motional*.<sup>27</sup> As matter, Williams reminds us, poems act on us—they mobilize. Poems also put themselves in relation to other objects, and so they must be commensurate with modern experience.

Ultimately, Williams's nonmodern imagination encourages that we re-think noise to encompass its potential to form new relations as it alters old systems. For Williams, the value of the imagination lies in its capacity to generate new interdependencies between subjects, objects, bodies, and words. Rather than conceiving of noise strictly as unwelcome sound, Williams compels us to define it more broadly as, in the words of musicologist Marie Thompson, "a process of interruption that induces change" (13). Understood in this way, noise proves to be a productive artistic resource for Williams in so far as it allows him to enact its interruptive potential through any medium, be it a body, a printed text, or a pair of eyeglasses. As I hope this essay has shown, Noisy Williams not only affirms the central role the imagination plays in the production of knowledge, but it insists alongside new media theorists on broader definitions of noise so as to include other media; for, it is not so much the scratching sounds of the apparatus that interrupts the human messages encoded; rather, it is our altered perception, or the change in how we receive and interpret its messages, that produces socially-engaged epistemologies. In the end, if Williams's poetics of noise seems contrived and fanciful in its attribution of

agency to the imagination, whether imagined or real, it encourages active and participatory reading practices that are attuned to the compositional processes of modernity.

#### NOTES

I thank Kate Marshall for her encouraging feedback on earlier drafts, and Melba Cuddy-Keane for her thoughtful, challenging questions. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their charitable and helpful suggestions, and Robert Lawrence Caserio Jr. for his suggestion that these thoughts “put themselves in line.”

1. Case demonstrates that these two responses to romanticism (presentational and anti-mimetic) share a common origin in Deweyan philosophical principles: “In place of the romantic poetics of transcendence, Williams advocates a Deweyan poetics, one in which self and world, mind and object exist within a single field. In this paradigm, meaning is not generated through the mind’s power to transcend nature but arrived at collectively, through the shifting relations among writer, reader, words, and objects” (87).

2. According to Cushman, while the Emersonian impulse is for the poet to become a transparent eyeball and broadcast nature’s transcendental tunes, the poems that emerge are “corrupt” versions of the texts in nature, or in Emerson’s words, artificial constructions with architectures of their own. See Cushman’s “Transcendentalist Poetics” where he also argues that for Emerson Nature is not just the “green world” but everything that is outside of the mind (79); and Copestake’s *Ethics of William Carlos Williams’s Poetry* which contextualizes Williams’s (and pragmatism’s, especially William James’s) engagement with Emerson and unitarianism.

3. See Case (76–7) for Dewey’s definition of experience and Williams’s repurposing of Deweyan philosophical principles (83–5); Mikkelsen’s *Pastoral, Pragmatism, and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* where she argues that Williams’s poetic practice “defies dualistic conceptions of the world in an approach typical of pragmatism” (74); and Marsh’s *Money and Modernity*, especially the chapter, “Dewey, Williams, and the Pragmatic Poem” where he discusses Williams’s uses of Dewey’s philosophy as a response to corporate capitalism.

4. Dewey’s idea of experience shares much in common with Caserio’s description of modernist impersonality. In “Abstraction, Impersonality, Dissolution,” Caserio draws on a wide range of modernist poets and writers—from Woolf and DuBois, to Wells and Stein—in order to argue that for modernists impersonality entails “identity’s escape from concrete personal terms into vital abstraction” (203). See Cuddy-Keane, Hammond, and Peat’s “Personality, Impersonality” entry in *Modernism Keywords*, where they give an account of the complexity of modernist uses of the personality/impersonality dyad.

5. For an overview of the contested uses of the term “modern” in the modernist period, see Cuddy-Keane.

6. To be clear, Marsh is interested in how Williams and Pound respond to modernity. According to Marsh, both repurpose Jeffersonian idealism to critique corporate capitalism; they differ in the former's interest in Dewey's pragmatism and the latter's interest in authoritarianism.

7. Throughout the course of this essay, the concept of "life" comes up in relation to the imagination, raising the question of whether there is a vitalistic epistemology at work in Williams's *Spring and All*. Such an inquiry takes me away from the immediate task at hand, but my reading of imagination as facilitating creative action in the world points to Williams's interest in what constitutes life.

8. See Mikkelsen's section "Filth, the 'Local,' and Pragmatist Aesthetics" for a discussion of the uses to which Williams puts Deweyan philosophical ideas (70–5). In particular, the correspondences between Dewey's *Art as Experience* and *Spring and All* are noteworthy:

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey stresses art's continuity with the everyday world, art as process rather than product, and the artist as the one who expresses the natural continuity between nature and culture, the ordinary and the aesthetic, the ugly and the beautiful. Just as Williams understood poetry to be an imaginative dimension linked to the real world, so too did Dewey see nature's and the artist's 'forms' as points on a continuum of experience. Rather than an object separate from the world, art is a kind of activity, a way of being. (Mikkelsen 74–5)

9. Lambeth-Climaco refers to as "Williams's rhetoric of overreaching" which she defines as the poet's striving after a "purity of a different kind" from that developed by Eliot and Pound: one that seeks "contact" with reality (40–1). For Marsh, purity carries a different connotation: it is to be virtuous and in an original relation to the universe. Thus, the discourse of purity is linked with the ideology of agrarianism (the poet as farm laborer), and with the critique of paper money as the base of all (monetary) value which corrupts this relation. Most intriguing is Marsh's observation, via Walter Benn Michaels, that "Jeffersonians [like Pound and Williams] have been alternatively troubled by the seeming arbitrariness of monetary value, and their wish that money, like language, should somehow be 'natural' or that money should correspond in some intimate, intrinsic way to real things in nature and the world" (26). I agree with many of Marsh's and Lambeth-Climaco's claims, though in light of what Latour has to say about purity, I believe "impurity" describes Williams's poetics of contact more accurately.

10. Ahearn, Davidson, Fredman, Huehls, and Sayre are among the many scholars who engage Williams's interest in the materiality of poetry.

11. See McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (7–21), for a discussion of the term. The chapter opens in Latourian fashion: "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to



splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message” (7). For an overview of McLuhan’s work, see Lapham’s excellent introduction.

12. The musicality of rhyme and meter is different from noise, and the reader might be reminded that Williams in fact writes in *Spring and All* that, “I do not believe writing would gain in quality or force by seeking to attain the conditions of music.” Indeed, according to Williams, the poet can approach the conditions of music not by dissociating words from their referents but “when they are liberated from their usual quality of that meaning” (CP1 235). I take this as a cue that we need new conceptual categories to describe Williams’s new poetic measure, even if theories of “noise” do not quite cut it.

13. Hayles coins the concept “material metaphor” in *Writing Machines* to discuss the ways that the physical properties of a medium structure our interactions with it. The book, for instance, is a material metaphor whose structure shapes its meaning (22). Walls identifies a related concept, “the radical metaphor,” which according to Charles Feidelson, Jr., was “a mode of perception that united past and present, idea and material fact, in the objectively given” (Walls *Seeing New Worlds* 151). For an application of the concept of the material metaphor in American naturalism, see Marshall’s *Corridors*.

14. See Morton on the idea of the Möbius strip (108–9). On the whole, his work also attempts to grapple with the Middle Kingdom, but he only pays attention to the bottom half of the constitution where the hybrids reproduce, while as yet neglecting the work of purification they perform at the top when they become epistemologically productive.

15. Pickard discusses Williams’s poetry within “a lineage of noise” that comes out of a “Romantic model of poetic description.” He continues: “If, as Williams put it, ‘A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words,’ these various poetics all allow its mechanical hum to sound out [. . .]. Each has its own particular sorts of hum—emotion, parody, breath, language—but all prefer that hum to the things, as it were, that the machine produces” (106).

16. By no means an exhaustive list, see Miller who describes Williams’s poetic practise in phenomenological terms, that is, as evoking a felt experience of the world that transcends the confines of the ego; Sayre who argues that Williams’s poetry embraces a Cartesian mind-world bifurcation, in which the poet’s visual forms order a chaotic and formless world; and Rapp who proposes that the ego is validated and not relinquished in Williams’s poetry, expanding to the point that it absorbs everything into itself. More recently, Lambeth-Climaco turns her attention to the imagination in *Spring and All* which she describes as “significant because it seems to be detached—in spite of the shared root word—from the production of images. Instead it is a realm of poet and reader, a form of energy, a *point of contact*” (45). See

also Mikkelsen who writes that Williams's poetic practise defies dualistic conceptions of the world:

Such poetry, in the words of the 1923 *Spring and All*, “has to do with the crystallization of the imagination—the perfection of new forms as additions to nature” (CP1 226). Rather than central, the “I” is occluded here, the poetic and real worlds blurred. When the poet “spoke of flowers,” he enters a new poetic dimension, one that is at once ‘real’ and yet not a material foundation for a fixed set of subject/object, human/environmental relationships. (123)

17. For a more in-depth discussion of modernist impersonality within the context of emotion as “a collective phenomenon that is not necessarily related to an individual psychology” (62), see Rives.

18. Williams's portrayal of the imagination as an embodied entity is an effort to continue the project he began in *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*. See *Spring and All* where the poet writes that “[t]he virtue of the improvisations is their placement in a world of new values [. . .] their fault is their dislocation of sense, often complete. But it is the best I could do under the circumstances. It was the best I could do and retain any value to experience at all. [. . .] Now I have come to a different condition. I find that the values there discovered can be extended” (CP1 203).

19. Intriguingly, in *Experience and Nature* Dewey opens with a similar view about the flexibility of conceptual categories: “One can only hope in the course of the whole discussion to disclose the meanings which are attached to ‘experience’ and ‘nature,’ and thus insensibly produce, if one is fortunate, a change in the significations previously attached to them” (2a).

20. Walls's notion of transjectivity fuses the concepts “objective” and “subjective” in “Walking West, Gazing East.” Transjectivity shares much in common with Latour's concept of hybridization discussed earlier in this essay.

21. In this and subsequent readings of poems, I loosely draw on Peirce's theory of signs. I refer the reader to Peirce's descriptions of legisigns, which is the more specialized term he uses to describe conventional (symbolic) signs. In “Logic as Semiotic” Peirce writes, “[a] *Legisign* is a law that is a Sign. This law is usually established by men. Every conventional sign is a legisign [but not conversely]. It is not a single object, but a general type. [. . .] Every legisign signifies through an instance of its application, which may be termed a *Replica* of it. Thus, the word ‘the’ will usually occur from fifteen to twenty-five times on a page. It is in all these occurrences one and the same word, the same legisign. Each single instance of it is a *Replica*. The *Replica* is a *Singisign*” (102).

22. Siegert's model of “cultural techniques” helps articulate both the way that the imagination activates crossings while at the same time mobilizing the processes of purification

that yield the oppositional discourses of nature and culture. His concept of cultural techniques elucidates the extent to which the poet theorizes and channels, in writing, the poem's natural and cultural operations. Crucially, the word "culture" operates, etymologically, as a media concept for Siegert: "*culture*, deriving from Latin *colere* and *cultura*, contains an eminently practical dimension by referring to the development and practical application of technologies for cultivating the soil and developing the land" (29).

23. Williams here diverges from Emerson who in "The Poet" writes "The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form" (186).

24. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour writes: "I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer. The former is thirty-five years old, the latter hundreds of thousands. Will you see me as a DIY expert 'of contrasts' because I mix up gestures from different times? Would I be an ethnographic curiosity? On the contrary: show me an activity that is homogeneous from the point of view of the modern time." (75) Latour's concept of polytemporality shares much in common with Dimock's articulation of "deep time" in *Through Other Continents*, where she challenges notions of periodization that understand time in strictly synchronic terms.

25. For a related contemporary perspective, see Latour's "An attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'" where he argues that what we need are "better constructions" and ethical values guiding our knowledge-making practices.

26. Holsapple traces Williams's engagement with American pragmatism in the development of this concept. For nineteenth-century origin of this idea, see Walls's *Seeing New Worlds*, where she argues that relational ways of knowing can be traced back to the natural philosophy of Alexander von Humboldt. Walls discusses Thoreau's conception of embodied knowledge within the context of this Humboldtian lineage in the chapter, "Cosmos: Knowing as Worlding," especially pages 147–57.

27. See Hammond's *Literature in the Digital Age* where he argues that modernist writers such as Bertolt Brecht, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and Walter Benjamin, were "inspired by the advent of electronic media to imagine new forms and new social roles for literature" (31). Hammond is also interested in how modernists repurposed written forms to create more participatory and collective reading practices that we currently associate with digital media. See also *Bird Relics*, where Arsić writes that Thoreau "wants to read 'the Nature right' by despiritualizing it, that is, by passing through the curtains of metaphors to reach the material itself, and he tries to do that through a process I call 'literalization,' consisting of the twofold gesture I have discussed so far: turning the word into some sort of thing, capable of affecting bodies; and bringing words closer to objects, recovering the presence of objects in names" (8). The same can be said of Williams who wants his poems to be impactful. I agree with Arsić that Thoreau's vitalism leads him not only toward non-western notions of personhood but also toward a participatory ethics of care, but I disagree with her reading of Thoreau's project of literalization as "a critique of the literary" (12).

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