

A Mesh of Strange Strangers in Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now* (2011): An Exploration of Timothy Morton's Ecological Thought

Alwyn Roux

Summary

In this article, I utilise theoretical concepts from Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought* (2010) to examine selected poems by Juliana Spahr from her poetry collection *Well Then There Now* (2011). Many of the poems in this collection, especially "Things of each possible relation hashing against one another" (WT 53-67) and "Gentle now, don't add to heartache" (WT 122-133), deal with the interconnectivity of all human and non-human beings. Spahr's idea of inter-connectedness relates philosophically to Morton's definition of "the ecological thought" as a "practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral" (2010: 107/2088). It would thus be illuminating to use Morton's concepts as set out in his ontology about the interconnectivity of all things, in particular, "the mesh" and "the strange stranger", to read Spahr's poems in *Well Then There Now*. "The mesh" imagines inter-connectedness and asks, "who or what is interconnected with what or with whom" as an attempt to illustrate that "nothing exist all by itself" (2010: 108/2088), whereas "the strange stranger" relates to the interconnectivity of all things because it comes forth from the interconnectedness that characterises everything. Morton (2010: 246/1088) writes: "The strange stranger isn't just a blank at the end of a long list of life forms we know (aardvarks, beetles, chameleons ... the strange stranger). The strange stranger lives within (and without) each and every being." The interconnectedness of all things is an interesting characteristic of Spahr's poems, and Morton's theoretical concepts provide the necessary tools to emphasise these different relationships extensively.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel maak ek gebruik van Timothy Morton se teoretiese konsepte soos ontleen aan sy boek *The Ecological Thought* (2010) om gedigte deur Juliana Spahr van haar poësiebundel *Well Then There Now* (2011) te bestudeer. Baie van die gedigte in die bundel, veral "Things of each possible relation hashing against one another" (WT 53-67) en "Gentle now, don't add to heartache" (WT 122-133), handel oor die interafhanklikheid van alle menslike en niemenslike wesens. Spahr se idee van interafhanklikheid kom filosofies ooreen met Morton se definisie van "die ekologiese gedagte" as 'n "practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral" (2010: 107/2088). Dit sou daarom verhelderend wees om Morton se konsepte soos uitgewerk in sy ontologie van die interafhanklikheid van alle dinge, in die besonder, "maaswerk" en "die vreemde

JLS/TLW 37(1), March/Maart 2021
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387



vreemdeling” te gebruik, om Spahr se gedigte in *Well Then There Now* te lees. Die konsep van “maaswerk” verbeel interafhanklikheid en vra “who or what is interconnected with what or with whom” as ’n poging om te wys dat “nothing exist all by itself” (2010: 108/2088), waarteenoor “die vreemde vreemde-ling” verband hou met die interafhanklikheid van alle dinge omdat dit voortkom uit die verstregelde aard wat alles kenmerk. Morton (2010: 246/2088) skryf: “The strange stranger isn’t just a blank at the end of a long list of life forms we know (aardvarks, beetles, chameleons ... the strange stranger). The strange stranger lives within (and without) each and every being.” Die interafhanklikheid van alle dinge is ’n interessante kenmerk van Spahr se poësie, en Morton se teoretiese konsepte voorsien die nodige gereedskap om die verskillende verhoudings op ’n uitgebreide wyse te beklemtoon.

1 Introduction

Juliana Spahr (1966-) was born in Chillicothe, Ohio, and currently resides in Berkeley, California. Her poetry explores issues such as war, politics, and environmental matters. She debuted as a poet in 1996 with *Response* (1996), for which she won the National Poetry Series Award in the USA. Her publications include *Fuck you – Aloha – I love you* (2001), *Things of Each Possible Relationship Hashing Against One Another* (2003), *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005), *The Transformation* (2007), *Well Then There Now* (2011) and *That Winter the Wolf Came* (2015).¹

In this article, I examine her collection entitled *Well Then There Now*, which deals with the interconnectivity of all human and non-human things, focusing in particular on the poem “Gentle now, don’t add to heartache” (WT 122-133). The eight sections in this collection are linked through the different ways in which interconnectivity is brought about and (or) described between human and non-human beings.

In the penultimate sonnet of the section “Sonnets”, for example, the interdependence of all things is represented in an intricate manner. The speaker illustrates how human beings, upon their arrival (at an undisclosed time), finds all things interdependent and compares it to the vegetation on the Hawaiian Islands. Lamentably, the humans (or perhaps Westerners?) disturb the vegetation through their counter operation to “uproot”, pulling out the earth with the roots, moving and displacing it, and to “bunker”, refuelling, tanking up, or taking in bunkers. Spahr writes:

We arrived and everything was interconnected
as twining green maile shrub
as huehue haole.
Our response was to uproot and to bunker.

1. The biographical information is from Sophie Robinson’s entry on Juliana Spahr in *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry* (2013).

A MESH OF STRANGE STRANGERS IN JULIANA SPAHR'S ...

We arrived and the rain soaked us regularly
as it soaked others and fed rivulets and streams.
It was gentle and warm
but still we built and we bunkered.

This growing and this flowing into all around us confused us.
We didn't know the right and the wrong.
We couldn't tell where we began and where we ended with the land
and with the others,
where we loved and where we didn't and where we weren't even
though we longed.

The vivid imagery of the first stanza, which focuses on the lush vegetation of the island, “as twining green maile shrub / as huehue haole”, as well as the sensuousness of the rain in the second stanza, give rise to the philosophical reflection in the last stanza of the sonnet. The speaker acknowledges that “we” were “confused” as to where “we began and where we ended”, which links to Spahr’s own criticism of “nature poetry” in an endnote to “Things of each possible relation hashing against one another” (WT 53-67): “[...] I was more suspicious of nature poetry because even when it got the birds and the plants and the animals right it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird’s habitat” (WT 69). The problematic relationship between human and non-human entities in this poem, shows how her work emphasises the way things exist separately and are not understood in an integrated way.

The poems in Spahr’s collection connect to the ideas expressed by Timothy Morton in his work *The Ecological Thought* (2010), in which Morton describes “the ecological thought” as “a practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral” (2010: 107).

Furthermore, the recurrent motif of the arrival of “we” in Spahr’s poems links to Timothy Morton’s concept of “the strange stranger”, which relates to the interconnectivity of all human and non-human things because it comes forth from the interconnectedness that characterises all human and non-human things. Morton adopted this concept from Jacques Derrida’s *arrivant*, that is, “the ultimate arrival to whom one must extend ultimate hospitality” (Morton, 2010: 1809). Derrida explores the possible meanings of the “*arrivant*” in *Aporias* (1993), in which the word can mean “the neutrality of that which arrives”, but also

the singularity of who arrives, he or she who comes, coming to be where s/he was not expected, where one was awaiting him or her without waiting for him or her, without expecting it [*s’y attendre*], without knowing what or whom to expect, what or whom I am waiting for – and such is hospitality itself, hospitality toward the event (Derrida 1993: 33).

The consequence of these different “arrivals” in Spahr’s poems is that the “we” that “come into” certain “worlds” do not necessarily have the same meaning or consequence as in other poems. In the title of the opening poem “Some of we and the land was never ours” (WT 9-15), the word “some” in the phrase implies that only a select few are included in the “we”. From this, the reader cannot be sure who the “some of we” refers to (also note the play on word “some” as “sum”, that is the whole of, the totality).

In Spahr’s essay, “Dole street” (WT 31-51), the street name is read against the background of Hawaii’s colonial past: “The fact that certain people had to meet the values, languages, and desires of certain others who suddenly arrived [...]” (WT 48). The actor “we”, who arrives, may refer to the Western colonisers, and a postcolonial approach can be employed in the analysis of the text. In “Things of each possible relation hashing against one another” (WT 53-67) the pronoun “we” gains the potential of any possible relationship towards other existing entities through the poetic device of juxtaposition: “[...] therefore we are/ dragonfly, ant, moth, caterpillar, woodborer/ we are consequently/ we are consequently” (WT 63). In this, a deconstructive reading strategy could be used in the dissemination of the text,² although an ecocritical approach³ is more fitting to Spahr’s argument.

In this article, however, I focus on utilising Timothy Morton’s theoretical sphere of the ecological thought to read Spahr’s poems. Morton (2010: 110/2088) explains, “The ecological thought is a thought about ecology, but it is also a thinking that is ecological.” Building on *Ecology without nature* (2007), Morton rejects the idea of “Nature” (with a capital letter), resonating with aspects such “hierarchy, authority, harmony, purity, neutrality, and mystery” (Morton 2010: 55/2088). Instead, Morton (2010: 62/2088) stresses that ecology “includes all the ways we imagine we live together. Existence is always coexistence.”

-
2. A deconstructive reading strategy of Spahr’s text would indicate, for example, how her writing undermines binary oppositions between human/non-human beings, living/non-living entities, us/them, and culture/ nature. Although the main figure of deconstructive criticism, Jacques Derrida, sets out to do more with deconstruction than develop “new tech-niques of reading” (Eagleton 1996: 148), the *new materialism(s)* and *post-humanism* turn to “matter as a necessary critical engagement [...] from a collective discontent with the linguistic turn and social constructionism” (Sanzo 2018).
 3. As part of her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty (1996: xviii-xix) defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment”. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism asks, “How is nature represented in this sonnet?”, “What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel?”, “Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom?”, etc.

2 The Ecological Thought

The poems in Spahr's collection connect to the ideas expressed by Timothy Morton in his book *The Ecological Thought* (2010). Morton describes "the ecological thought" as "a practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings – animal, vegetable, or mineral" (2010: 107). It would thus be illuminating to employ some of the concepts that Morton sets out in his ontology about the interconnectivity of all things, such as "the mesh" and "the strange stranger" to read Spahr's poems in *Well there then now*. The innovative way of thinking about the interdependence of all things is derived from the object-oriented ontology, a Heidegger-influenced philosophical movement that expresses a unique form of realism and non-anthropocentric thinking (Morton 2013: 121/4946).

Graham Harman pioneered object-oriented ontology (abbreviated OOO, and pronounced "Triple O")⁴ in four of his books, namely *Tool-being* (2002), *Guerilla Metaphysics* (2005), *Prince of Networks* (2009), and *The Quadruple Object* (2011). In addition to these books, Morton (2011: 164) mentions Levi Bryant's *The Democracy of Objects* (2011) and Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) as important additions to the theory. Recently, he published *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2017) which outlines the most important aspects of the theory. Morton's article "Here comes everything: The promise of object-oriented ontology" (2011: 163-190) highlights the main aspects of OOO, which I have briefly summarised below in order to show how Morton's theoretical sphere of "the ecological thought" relates to OOO⁵.

Morton's (2011: 165) describes the breakthrough of OOO as Graham Harman's extension "from subject-object relationships to object-object. Objects encounter each other as operationally closed systems that can only (mis)translate one another". Morton (2011: 165) further shows an interesting characteristic of objects, namely that they are "profoundly 'withdrawn' – we can never see the whole of it, and nothing else can either". Morton (2011: 166) derives the concept of "the strange stranger" from this idea – "[t]he more we know about a strange stranger, the more she (he, it) withdraws".

OOO operates in a relatively "flat ontology" (Morton 2011: 165). Harman (2012: 16) argues this in his review of *The Ecological Thought* as follows:

4. See Harman (2017: 6).

5. Morton (2011: 164) notes that "OOO belongs to recent attempts to rethink realism that have held sway for some decades. In so doing it shares affinities with ecocriticism and ecophilosophy as propounded by Lawrence Buell, Scott Slovic, Greg Garrar, and Jonathan Bate". At the same time, Morton (2011: 164) explains that "OOO decisively departs from standard ecological criticism, by enabling a ruthless rejection of the concept of Nature, in part because Nature is correlationist."

... we should note that there are two possible readings of the thesis that everything is connected. We could read it in the sense of a strong connectivity: everything is completely determined by its interactions with everything else; nothing is an independent, autonomous thing outside its relations But the phrase “everything is connected” might also be read in the less extreme sense of weak connectivity. Here it would simply mean that all objects belong to a single network, with no dualistic separation between mind and matter, spiritual and corporeal, or anything else of the sort. Weak connectivity would amount to nothing more than Manuel DeLanda calls a flat ontology If we try to determine whether Morton adheres to strong connectivity (holism), or simply weak connectivity (flat ontology), the answer soon becomes obvious – Morton is a flat ontologist rather than a holist. Consider the following passage: “The ecological thought isn’t about a superorganism. Holism maintains that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. ‘Nature’ tends to be holistic. Unlike Nature, what the ecological thought is thinking isn’t more than the sum of its parts.”

It is clear that Harman’s object-oriented ontology is fundamental in understanding Morton’s ecological thought, in particular the concepts of the mesh and the strange stranger.⁶

In an article using Morton to conduct a materialist reading of poet Johann Lodewyk Marais’s work, Susan Smith (2014: 749-774) conveys how the theoretical frameworks of new materialism and object-oriented ontology lead to the rethinking of materiality:

Object-oriented ontology and the new materialism are forms of realism that asserts, in the words of Timothy Morton (2011b: 165), “that real things exist”. It does not see nature as a passive construct, but rather as a mediating force effecting interaction with and change of other elements, including man.
(Smith 2014: 750)

For the purposes of this article, however, the focus is not on new materialism but object-oriented ontology as methodology for utilising Morton’s theoretical concepts of the ecological thought.

Morton’s use of the “the mesh” imagines interconnectedness and asks, “who or what is interconnected with what or with whom” as an attempt to illustrate that “nothing exist all by itself” (2010: 108/2088). Harman (2012: 17) cites Morton in defining the mesh as “a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite centre or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise”; Morton’s mesh “simply flattens the world into ‘the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things’”. Similarly,

6. Harman (2012: 18-19) also discusses Morton’s theoretical concepts of the mesh and the strange stranger in terms of his own distinction between “real” and “sensuous” objects, but a discussion of the similarities and differences of the terms falls outside the scope of this article.

Morton's concept of the mesh explains "inter-connected coexistence" from an object-oriented ontology. Welch (2014: 6) argues: "As a description of interdependence, the mesh is a useful concept for de-privileging the human, for acknowledging our dependence on the co-shaping 'touch' of others, and recognizing that the boundaries between life-forms are often permeable." Morton's (2010: 446-450/2088) discussion of symbiosis is telling of this "permeability": "If everything is interconnected, there is less of everything. Nothing is complete in itself. Consider symbiosis. A tree includes fungi and lichen. Lichen is two life forms interacting – a fungus and a bacterium or a fungus and an alga. Seeds and pollen have birds and bees to circulate them. [...] And ultimately, as Richard Dawkins puts it, 'we are all symbiotic colonies of genes'. Even DNA is subject to symbiosis, coevolution, parasitism, conflict, and cooperation."

It is important to consider Spahr's poems in *Well Then There Now* in the light of Morton's theoretical sphere, "the ecological thought", as well as its theoretical concepts ("mesh", the "strange stranger", etc.) as Spahr's poetry can be seen as an example of how the ecological thought is conceived⁷ – compare Morton (2010: 120-125/2088):

Thinking the ecological thought is difficult: it involves becoming open, radically open – open forever, without the possibility of closing again. Studying art provides a platform, because the environment is partly a matter of perception. Art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality.

(Morton 2010: 120-125/2088)

Spahr's poem, entitled "Things of each possible relationship hashing against one another" emphasises the existence of different relationships between things. Upon closer reading, one also finds that the relationships may be different in nature, for instance, symbiotic and/or parasitic. The first three lines of Spahr's poem reads:

The view from the sea
the constant motion of claiming, collecting, changing, and taking
the calmness of bays and the greenness of land caused by the freshness of
things growing into ...

7. However, it is important to note that the theory and the work are not predisposed to "prove" each other. I understand how utilising a theory to illuminate a pared-down selection of work tends towards an A=A structure. Spahr's writings, however, is a testament to "becoming open, radically open" (cf. Morton 2010: 120-125/2088). As Welch (2014:4) contends by referring to Spahr dissertation, *Everybody's Autonomy* (2001), her poems "become models for inclusivity and interconnectedness" opposed to "exclusivity and hierarchical relationships".

The way in which the viewer perceives the sea with its waves, the bays, the land, and the vegetation illustrates that there is a particular relationship between the different elements, emphasising the interconnectedness of things. As the speaker sets up a scene of the sea, the “constant motion” probably refers to the continuous movement of the waves. The movement is further qualified by certain actions of “claiming, collecting, changing, and taking”. Each of the verbs describes a different action and sheds light on the relationship between the various elements. The speaker expands the sea-*scape* by linking the waves to the “calmness of bays and the greenness of land”, whose tranquillity and greenness are the effects of the freshness of things growing. The words “growing into” diminish the distance between the viewer and the landscape scene in the distance:

... growing into
the arrival of someplace else
the arrival of someplace differently
the freshness of the things increasing
the greenness of the ground
the calmness of the compartments
the constant movement of claim, to gather, to change, and to consider the sea

The words “growing into” assume that the actions of “claiming, collecting, changing, and taking” operate as a continuous and sustained process of movement that relates to “the arrival of someplace else” (4). Therefore, the arrival does not necessarily assume the person arriving somewhere else, but rather that the place has changed over time. The place becomes “some place differently” (5), a different or unique place with various attributes, for example, the freshness of the air that increases, as well as the greenness of the soil.

So far, it seems that all the things in the poem are non-human entities, but the word “compartments” suggests the action of humans making divisions, that is to divide into separate spaces. The “compartments” (8) are ironically qualified with the word “calmness” in the line “the calmness of the compartments” as if this kind of compartmentalisation is favoured. Contrary to the waves’ constant motion of “claiming, collecting, changing, and taking”, the “constant motion” in line 9 refers to human actions. These human activities *also* have an impact on “the arrival to someplace different”, which the rest of the poem explores. Through the close reading of the first ten lines of the poem, we can see how Spahr’s poems develop the inter-relationships of things in an intricate and complex manner.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of “the strange stranger” relates to the interconnectivity of all human and nonhuman things because it comes forth from the interconnectedness that characterises all human and non-human things. Morton (2010: 246/2088) explains that “The strange stranger isn’t just a blank at the end of a long list of life forms we know (aardvarks, beetles,

chameleons ... the strange stranger). The strange stranger lives within (and without) each and every being." Morton's use of a list to define what the strange stranger is not, shows an interesting relation with two of Spahr's poems, namely "Unnamed dragonfly species" (WT 73-93) and "Gentle now, don't add to heartache" (WT 122-133). "Unnamed dragonfly species" initially seems strange because the narrative is interrupted with names of species (in bold) throughout the text. Compare the first paragraph (WT 75):

The city of Rotterdam sent over daffodils. **A Noctuid Moth** The daffodils bloomed in the first weeks of April. **Allegheny Woodrat** They were everywhere. **American Bittern** They were yellow. **American Burying Beetle** It was April and then the temperature was 90 degrees and all daffodils died immediately. **Arogos Skipper** All at the same time. **Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtle** This happened right where they were living. **Atlantic Ridley Sea Turtle** It was early April. **Bald Eagle** ...

The content and form aspects of the poem are strange and bring the following questions to the fore: Why is the narrative of the daffodils interrupted with the names of these species? What is the relevance of the names and why are they listed in alphabetical order? Does the narrative of Rotterdam's daffodils that died in the heat in the first week of spring allude to climate change and global warming? Could the reader conclude from the latter that the narrative explicitly refers to global warming and the implications that it has on the species listed? Should the latter be the case, why does the speaker bring it to our attention?⁸

In Morton's (2010: 1274) words: "simply because we're sentient – let's set the bar low to ensure that even snails and the snailiest humans are also responsible – we're obliged to address global warming". Global warming is described in Morton's book *Hyperobjects* (2013) as a "hyperobject", that is "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" like "a black hole, the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism" (107/4946). The death of the daffodils as described in Spahr's poem is a footprint of a hyperobject known as global warming (Morton, 2013: 1559). Morton (2013: 120, 2094) mentions that hyperobjects are "directly responsible" for what he calls "the end of the world", which necessitates the need to "care" for hyperobjects. He argues that: "The attempt to care for hyperobjects and for their distant future guardians will strikingly change how humans think about themselves and their relationship with nonhumans" (Morton 2013: 2094/4946), and: "Hyperobjects insist that we

8. Gina Myers (2012: 86) contends that the poem "successfully captures the anxiety many environmentalists are likely to feel in this day and age – the overwhelming sense that things are damaged beyond repair, that reducing one's own carbon footprint may not do much in the grand scheme of things".

care for them in the open. ‘Out of sight, out of mind’ is strictly untenable. There is no ‘away’ to throw plutonium in. We are stuck with it, in the same way as we are stuck with our biological bodies” (Morton 2013: 2086/4946). Similarly, the representation of the pollution in streams of Ohio is the focal point in “Gentle now, don’t add to heartache” that threatens the natural habitat, biodiversity, and the survival of the species.

3 “Gentle Now, don’t Add to Heartache”

To gain a better understanding of Spahr’s “Gentle now, don’t add to heartache”, I will briefly outline the main events of each poem. The first poem shows the way in which the actor “we” is incorporated into the “world” as part of a bigger process of becoming:

We come into the world and there it is.
We come into the world without and we breathe it in.
The sun is there.
The brown of the river leading to the blue and the brown of the
ocean is there.
Salmon and eels are there moving between the brown and the
brown and the blue.
The green of the land is there.
Elders and youngers are there.
We come into the world and we are there.
Fighting and possibility and love are there.
And we begin to breathe.

Upon arriving in the “world”, the figure “we” is not yet part of the world, but a kind of object considered from a distance. Word paintings represent things that make up the world, for example, “[t]he brown of the river leading to the blue and the brown of the ocean”, and “[s]almon and eels are moving between the brown and the brown and the blue”.

For the first time in the poem, “we” are represented as part of the “world” in that the speaker mentions that “we” enter the “world” and find ourselves “there”: “We come into the world and we are there.” Being there in the “world” shows the possibilities of participating in meaningful relationships that characterise the “world”. The last four lines summarise the previous as follows:

We come into the world and there it is.
We come into the world without and we breathe it in.
We come into the world and begin to move between the brown and
the blue and the green of it.

The second poem shows how the figure “we” forms part of the “stream”, and the “stream” forms part of the “rivers”, as well as the “oceans” and the “gulfs”. The figure “we” then also becomes acquainted with other life forms (“the caddisfly larva”, “the creek chub”, and “the slenderhead darter”, and others) who inhabit the stream and gain knowledge of the stream. This illustrates how the speaker attempts to imagine the ecological thought in a similar way as Morton (2010: 25/2088) by showing how things are inter-connected on a large but also intimate scale. The first six lines of the second poem reveal how “we” form part of the “stream” as part of the bigger picture in which the world of the stream exists:

We came into the world at the edge of a stream.
The stream had no name but it began from a spring and flowed
down a hill into the Scioto that then flowed into the Ohio that then
flowed into the Mississippi that then flowed into the Gulf of Mexico.
The stream was a part of us and we were a part of the stream and
we were thus part of the rivers and thus part of the gulfs and the oceans.

Next, the speaker describes how the stream is explored, revealing a smaller narrative inside the bigger picture. The speaker points to the actions “we” perform that are associated with the kind of knowledge acquisition associated with a child’s play. These actions are significant because it marks the actions of human beings becoming aware of the environment that they find themselves in. The sentence structure is announced in parallel in the form of pronouns and verbs – compare the beginning of each of the rules: “We looked ...”, “We counted ...”, “We learned to recognize ...”, “We appreciated ...” and “We mimicked ...”:

And we began to learn the stream.
We looked under the stones for the caddisfly larvae and its adhesive.
We counted the creek chub and we counted the slenderhead darter.
We learned to recognize the large, upright, dense, candle-like
clusters of yellowish flowers at the branch ends of the horsechestnut
and we appreciated the feathery gracefulness of the drooping, but
upturning, branchlets of the larch.
We mimicked the catlike meow, the soft quirtt or kwut, and the
louder, grating ratchet calls of the gray catbird.

Next, the speaker shows the act of “putting heads together”, that is, thinking together about a thing, but it can also be seen as a loving gesture. This act shows the interweaving of the creatures in the stream and the movement to the place where the figure “we” do not necessarily assume a human being. The phrase “putting heads together” implies a special kind of thinking, echoed in Morton’s (2010: 25/2088) ecological thought, since “we” presume links in the chain of “mesh”, indicating interconnectedness, which includes water bacteria, insects, fish, trees, birds, animals, and humans. By putting heads

together, the boundaries between human and non-human entities start to blur. The stream becomes the meeting place where beings not only think together but also converse with one another, for example, “we talked to each other all day long/ because we loved”. The “talking” is associated with all forms of communication, which are not necessarily bound to a “human” language, but include, for example, the catbird’s calling and the imitation of the call. The reason why “we” are in communication with each other all day is “because we love”, but this “love” is not exclusive to people. This act shows the interweaving of creatures in the stream and the movement to the place where “we” not only assume human being. In effect, this act illustrates the idea of the “mesh”, or the interconnectedness of everything with everyone, but also the idea of “strange strangers”, wherein “we” ourselves find ourselves receding into strangeness. As Morton (2011: 165) explains:

Strange stranger names an unpredictable quality of life-forms which recede into strangeness the more we think about them. The strange stranger can be an animal or matter, something which we as humans cannot figure out, something lying beyond our grasp. It has to do with the concept of thinking about ecology as having no centre and no edge, as permitting no distance, having no definite inside or outside. What is within and what is without, and even what is human and what is nonhuman, become paradoxes.

The poem also progresses as “we” are now part of the stream, which emphasises inclusivity:

We put our heads together.
We put our heads together with all these things, with the caddisfly larva, with the creek chub and the slenderhead darter, with the horsechestnut and the larch, with the gray catbird.
We put our heads together on a narrow pillow, on a stone, on a narrow stone pillow, and we talked to each other all day long because we loved.

The last part of the second poem is an example of how Spahr expresses the “mesh” in a poetic manner. The “information” is recorded utilising the senses in contrasting ways, indicating the existence of the “mesh”:

We loved the stream.
And we were of the stream.
And we couldn’t help this love because we arrived at the bank of the stream and began breathing and the stream was various and full of information and it changed our bodies with its rotten with its cold with its clean with its mucky with fallen leaves with its things that bite the edges of the skin with its leaves with its sand and dirt with its pungent at moments with its dry and prickly with its warmth with its mushy and moist with its hard flat stones on the bottom with its

horizon lines of gently rolling hills with its darkness with its dappled light with its cicadas buzz with its trills of birds.

The repetition of the words “with its” emphasises the complex composition of the stream. The interaction of different bodies signifies the “mesh” (cf. Morton 2010: 764/2088), for example, the “rotten”, “cold”, “clean”, and “mucky” nature of things communicates sensory experience. Tangible words such as “sand and dirt”, “pungent”, and “dry and prickly”, “warmth” communicate the texture of things, while lines such as stepping on “hard flat stones on the bottom” when you are swimming in a stream communicate recognisable sensations. The mesh comprises all of this, which Morton (2010: 764/2088) explains through Heidegger:

Heidegger poetically said that you never hear the wind in itself, only the storm whistling in the chimney, the wind in the trees. The same is true of the mesh itself. You never perceive it directly. But you can detect it in the snails, the sea thrift, and the smell of the garbage can. The mesh is known through the being of the strange stranger.

The third poem reveals the interweaving of “we” as different forms of life that form part of the mesh: “We learned and we loved the black sandshell, the ash, the american bittern, the harelip sucker, the yellow bullhead, the beech, the great blue heron, the dobsonfly larva, the water penny larva ...” (the list continues in the same manner for two pages). The juxtaposition of beings should not be read as significant but rather as a metaphor for the way the mesh is represented as an entanglement of strange strangers.

In the acknowledgments of the collection, Spahr mentions that she derived the living beings in her book from *A Guide to Ohio Streams* (Sanders, 2000). The focus of the Ohio guide centres on the living creatures in the streams, which include water insects, shellfish, and fish. As part of a “first reading” of the poem, I focused on the different types of “freshwater mussels” found in the streams. A total of twenty-three different types of freshwater mussels appear on the list, including the “black sandshell”, “the white catspaw”, “the elephant ear”, “the spectacle case”, “the flat floater”, “the giant floater”, “the rabbitsfoot”, among others. Of the twenty-three different freshwater mussels mentioned in the list, eleven of them are endangered species, and two have already been completely eradicated. It is against this background of the extinction and loss of living beings that the poem should be read. After listing the life form, the speaker in Spahr’s poem represents the existence as coexistence of different life forms. The speaker also illustrates how “we” form part of the interweaving of all human and nonhuman beings that populate the stream. A lament follows as “we” sing “gentle now” to each of the beings mentioned in the list:

We sang gentle now.
Gentle now clubshell,
don't add to heartache.
Gentle now warmouth, mayfly nymph,
don't add to heartache.
Gentle now willow, freshwater drum, ohio pigtoe,
don't add to heartache.

[...]

Gentle now black sandshell, ash, american bittern, harelip sucker,
yellow bullhead, beech, great blue heron, dobsonfly larva, water
penny larva, birch, redhead, white catspaw, elephant ear, buckeye,
don't add to heartache.
Gentle now, we sang,
Circle our heart in rapture, in love-ache. Circle our heart.

The fourth poem shows, however, that these things cannot exist in equilibrium because the balance is disturbed in various ways. The speaker states that things were not “long lines of connection and utopia” but rather “broken lines of disconnection and dystopia”. The speaker places these things that reversed the coexistence in two categories. The phrase “some of it knowingly” suggests that there were things they knew about, and other things they did not know about causing the disconnection of “we”:

It was not all long lines of connection and utopia.
It was a brackish stream and it went through the field beside our
house.
But we let into our hearts the brackish parts of it also.
Some of it knowingly.
We let in soda cans and we let in cigarette butts and we let in pink
tampon applicators and we let in six pack of beer connectors and
we let in various other pieces of plastic that would travel through
the stream.

The things they knew of were everyday things like “soda cans”, “cigarette butts”, “pink tampon applicators”, “six pack of beer connectors”, and “other pieces of plastic that would travel through the stream”. The things they did not know of include “the runoff from agriculture, surface mines, forestry, home wastewater treatment systems, construction sites, [and] urban yards”:

And some of it unknowingly.
We let the run off from agriculture, surface mines, forestry, home
wastewater treatment systems, construction sites, urban yards,
and roadways into our hearts.

The speaker provides the key to the understanding of the poem as a whole in the first two lines of the fifth (and final) poem: "What I did not know as I sang the lament of what was becoming lost/ and what was already lost was how this lost would happen". The lyrical "I", in contrast with the actor "we", mentions that he or she "did not know that I would turn from the stream to each other". This suggests that it is the I who performs the action of turning away from the stream. The words "to each other" are ambiguous, but when the speaker describes to whom he or she is turning to, one sees the figure of a human being, represented as a strange stranger:

Ensnared, bewildered, I turned to each other and from the stream.
I turned to each other and I began to work for the chemical
factory and I began to work for the paper mill and I began to work
for the atomic waste disposal plant and I began to work at
keeping men in jail.

In reading Spahr's poem we can see the need for a symbiotic cohabitation of strange strangers in the mesh. The complex coexistence of stranger strangers in "Gentle now, don't add to heartache" shows the importance of thinking about interconnectivity. "Gentle now, don't add to heartache" emphasises the way in which known and unknown materials, consciously and unconsciously, became part of our everyday existence that radically disturbs the symbiotic relationships between human and non-human beings. Spahr highlights the far-reaching problems of the Anthropocene when she says in the fourth poem of "Gentle now, don't add to heartache":

We were born at the beginning of these things, at the time of
chemicals combining, at the time of stream run off.
These things were a part of us and would become more a part of us
but we did not know it yet.
Still we noticed enough to sing a lament.

4 Conclusion

This article presents a close reading of Juliana Spahr's poetry collection *Well Then There Now* by utilising Morton's theoretical framework of the ecological thought. It provides contextualisation of Morton's theoretical sphere and shows how it is associated with *New Materialism* and more specifically *Object-Oriented Ontology* (OOO). It illustrates that Morton's theoretical concepts from his ecological thinking, namely "the mesh" and "the strange stranger", can be used to explore Spahr's poems to gain a better understanding of Spahr's ideas of interconnectivity. Morton's concept of the mesh deprivileges the hierarchical position of the human being and rethinks human-animal-mineral relationships from a weak connectiveness (or a flat

ontology); the figure of the strange stranger shows how this reconfiguration recedes into strangeness, stressing the need for “generating care and concern for beings, no matter how uncertain we are of their identity, no matter how afraid we are of their existence” (Morton 2010: 263/2088). From the close readings, one understands how Spahr’s poems can be seen as a poetic expression of Morton’s ecological thought as she provides insight into the interconnectedness of human and non-human beings and living and non-living entities. Spahr’s poems can be read as a concretisation of Morton’s theoretical concepts of the mesh and the strange stranger providing insight into how the ecological thought can be thought of in an artistic manner through poetry.

References

- Bogost, Ian
 2012 *Alien Phenomenology, or What it's Like to be a Thing*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bryant, Levi R.
 2011 *The Democracy of Objects*. Michigan: Open Humanities Press.
- Derrida, Jacques
 1993 *Aporias*. Translated by Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Eagleton, Terry
 1996 *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl
 1996 Introduction: Literary Studies in the Age of Environmental Crisis. In Glotfelty, C. & Fromm, H. (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Land-marks in Literary Ecology*. London: The University of Georgia Press.
- Harman, Graham
 2002 *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Illinois: Carus Publishing Company.
 2005 *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Illinois: Carus Publishing Company.
 2009 *Prince of Networks; Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: Re. Press.
 2011 *The Quadruple Object*. Hants: Zero Books.
 2012 On the Mesh, the Strange Stranger, and Hyperobjects: Morton’s Ecological Ontology. *Tarp Architecture Manual*, pp. 16-19.
 2017 *Object-oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. London: Pelican.
- Morton, Timothy
 2007 *Ecology Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
 2010 *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
 2011 Here comes Everything. The Promise of Object-orientated Ontology. *Qui Parle* 19(2): 163-190.

A MESH OF STRANGE STRANGERS IN JULIANA SPAHR'S ...

- 2013 *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Myers, Gina
2012 Relations and in Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now.* *Denver Quarterly* 46(4): 84-87.
- Robinson, Sophie
2013 Juliana Spahr (1966-). In: Hamilton, I. & Noel-Tod, J. *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry* (2 ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sanders, Randall. E. (ed.)
2000 *A Guide to Ohio Streams. Ohio Chapter of the American Fisheries Society.* Ohio: Columbus.
- Sanzo, Kameron
2018 New Materialism(s). *Genealogy of the Posthuman.* Online: <<https://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms/#sidr-nav>>. 16 Jan. 2021.
- Smith, Susan
2014 Ecocriticism and the New Materialism. An Investigation of New Materialism in Selected Poems from the Volume *In die bloute* (2012) by Johann Lodewyk Marais. *LitNet Akademies* 11(2): 749-774.
- Spahr, Juliana
1996 *Response.* Sun & Moon Books: Ubu editions.
2001 *Everyone's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity.* Alabama: The University of Alabama Press.
2001 *Fuck You – Aloha – I Love You.* Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
2003 *Things of Each Possible Relation Hashing Against One Another.* Palm Press.
2005 *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
2011 *Well Then There Now.* Jaffrey, NH: Black Sparrow.
2015 *That Winter the Wolf Came.* Commune Editions.
- Welch, Tana Jean
2014 Entangles Species: The Inclusive Posthumanst Eco-poetics of Juliana Spahr. *Journal of Ecocriticism* 6(1): 1-25.

Alwyn Roux
University of South Africa
erouxap@unisa.ac.za