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"Informed Love": Human and Non-Human Bodies in Tim Robinson's Ethical Aesthetic

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Abstract. Tim Robinson's rich and variegated cultural productions have generated serious critical consideration in the twenty-first century, mostly addressing his use of folkways and mythology, the cartographic and artistic elements of his publications, as well his attention to language. Most recently, ecocritics have written about space and place in his texts, and the function of geography, landscape, and even geology in positioning Robinson within Ecocritical praxis. There has been very little attention paid, however, to the presence of animals in his work. The current practice of ecofeminism advocates and promotes a horizontal, dispersed, multiple conception of subjectivity, a critique that engages the ramifying consequences of the Western "subject" as it has apotheosized in Enlightenment discourse, including issues of embodiment. Animals, however understood, are instrumental to the project. This essay will discuss the many parallels and connections between Robinson and ecofeminist writers, allowing for a critical re-assessment of the previously misrepresented gender politics of Robinson's work.

Key Words. Irish writing, Tim Robinson, Feminism, Ecofeminism, New Materialism, Irish Landscape, Animal Studies.

Resumen. Los productos culturales firmados por Tim Robinson se caracterizan por su calidad y su diversidad, y han tenido una notable repercusión en la crítica en las primeras décadas del siglo XXI. Generalmente se ha prestado atención al uso por parte del autor de motivos populares y mitológicos en su obra, así como a los elementos cartográficos y artísticos en sus publicaciones. Su particular uso del lenguaje también ha sido objeto de estudio. En épocas más recientes, representantes de la ecocrítica han destacado el papel que juega el espacio y el lugar en los textos de Robinson, así como la función de la geografía, el paisaje, e incluso la geología, situando de esta forma al autor en el marco de esta corriente teórica. Sin embargo, no ha existido suficiente interés por la presencia de los animales en su obra. La práctica actual del ecofeminismo promueve y defiende un concepto horizontal, disperso y múltiple de la subjetividad, siguiendo de esta forma las ramificaciones del "sujeto" occidental tal y como se postula en el discurso de la Ilustración, incluyendo temas relacionados con la personificación.

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Los animales, en las múltiples acepciones del término, son parte fundamental de este proyecto y en el presente artículo se analizan las múltiples conexiones entre Robinson y los/las escritores/as ecofeministas, dando lugar a un reajuste interpretativo de previos estudios sobre cuestiones de género en la obra del autor que no fueron del todo acertados.

Palabras clave. Escritura irlandesa, Tim Robinson, feminismo, ecofeminismo, nuevo materialismo, paisaje irlandés, estudios sobre animales.

Tim Robinson is an Englishman who has lived for many years in Ireland; an artist, cartographer, and writer who, with his wife Mairéad, runs Folding Landscapes, a publishing house in Roundstone, Connemara, Galway, which produces, among other things, the incredibly detailed maps Robinson spent years making of the Aran Islands, the Burren, and Connemara. He has also been a dedicated activist, centrally involved, for example, in the campaign to stop construction of an airstrip that would be disastrous for the ecosystem of the Roundstone Bog. In response to Folding Landscapes being granted a European Conservation Award for its work by the mayor of Madrid in 1987, Robinson wrote a statement to the award's adjudicators in which he identified an "ethical attitude of informed love" as energizing his life-long pursuit of a "different awareness through art … making maps and writing books".[1] His books are themselves maps of the regions around Galway Bay, providing details of folklore, geology, family histories, politics, ethnography, zoology, economics, ornithology, botany, and language. As Jos Smith has recently argued, Robinson was "anticipating deep mapping" in the very diversity of his accomplishments: "One way of thinking about deep mapping is as a form of *working* the social and cultural medium of place – carefully and deliberately manipulating the relationships between these various and 'interlocking' depths and fields that our social life opens up – and in this sense the medium of place, for Robinson, is 'Space'". (284)

Robinson's rich and variegated cultural productions have generated serious critical consideration in the twenty-first century, mostly addressing his use of folkways and mythology, the cartographic and artistic elements of his publications, as well his attention to language. Most recently, ecocritics have written about space and place in his texts, and the function of geography, landscape, and even geology in positioning Robinson within ecocritical praxis. There has been very little attention paid, however, to the presence of animals in his work. One of the few references, fleeting, but insightful, is made by Karen Babine regarding the nonhuman in Robinson's writing: "Animals and terrain have linguistic agency, both in written form and in storytelling" (100). The granting of agency suggested here is a distinguishing feature of Robinson's engagement with the nonhuman, both "animate" and "inanimate", aligning his work with that of ecofeminists, particularly feminist "new materialists", such as Jane Bennett, Serenella Iovino, Rosa Baidotti, Stacy Alaimo, Ariel Salleh, and Karen Barad, whose work this essay will focus on in particular in relation to Robinson's. One of the founding theorists of ecofeminism, Val Plumwood, acknowledged and welcomed the new materialist development in ecocriticism, its contribution to our "need to question systems of thought that confine agency to a human or human-like consciousness and refuse to acknowledge the creativity of earth others … It is eminently rational, in our present circumstances, to follow critical methodologies foregrounding multiple agencies in the more-than-human world, both in our immediate lives and more generally in the universe" (117).

What distinguishes nearly all current work in the field of feminist new materialism is a desire to reconceive and re-orientate traditionally hierarchical relationships, to establish, according to Plumwood, "a depolarizing reconception of nonhuman nature which recognizes

the denied space of our hybridity, continuity, and kinship, and is also able to recognize, in suitable contexts, the difference of the nonhuman in a non-hierarchical way" (129). And so a central concern of ecocritics is to expose and deny asymmetrical dualisms, to argue, to paraphrase Iovino, for a culture of difference that brings into significance an open and inclusive range of subjects (and objects), that potentially recognizes and emancipates every form of otherness (54). The current practice of ecofeminism advocates and promotes a horizontal, dispersed, multiple conception of subjectivity, a critique that engages the ramifying consequences of the Western "subject" as it has apotheosized in Enlightenment discourse, including issues of embodiment. Animals, however understood, are instrumental to the project; as Robinson asserts, "animals can threaten the boundaries of the human psyche" (*Listening* 15). Ecofeminist Karen J Warren has identified a number of binaries central to "patriarchal theological tenets" as among the cultural mechanisms essential to the justification of subordination upon which assertions of superiority rely. Warren identifies "transcendence and domination of the natural world, fear of the body, projection of evil upon women, [and] world-destroying spiritual views" (25). As will become clear, the parallels and connections between Robinson and ecofeminist writers are numerous, allowing for a critical re-assessment of the previously misrepresented gender politics of Robinson's work.

In an Irish context, fear of the body, especially its role in the historic policing of women's sexuality, is a recurring object of Robinson's censure. He writes at length in the "Boneyard" chapter of *Connemara: Listening to the Wind*, of the Irish Roman Catholic Church's "world-destroying spiritual views", specifically its treatment of women and children. Robinson pauses to acknowledge unbaptized babies, considered "illegitimate" and buried in haste without ceremony, and condemns the "stony throats [that] continued for centuries to roar forth the consequences of their false premises high above the heads of suffering humanity" (97). Not only has Robinson been practicing deep mapping *avant la lettre*, but, he has also deepened – and widened – the very concept of mapping to encompass the far reaches of the cosmos as well as the tiniest of microscopic beings in the depths of the sea, and to embrace all human and nonhuman animals, living and dead. In doing so, this essay argues, he has also anticipated the recent material turn in environmental philosophy and ecological humanities which recognizes multiple agencies across the nonhuman world. Even when contemplating "space", this sensibility is evident, for example, in his curiosity about "how spaces of experience, human and non-human, relate to real space" (*My Time* 5). A revised understanding as what counts as experience across various delimiting binaries has implications for the way in which gender figures in environmental discourse.

Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage was the book that brought Robinson to popular and critical attention in 1986. Its most frequently cited passage is a description of the author's encounter with dolphins, which appears toward the end of the introductory chapter. Robinson identifies the dolphins as centrally significant not only in providing the book's problematic, but also in inspiring its dominant metaphor, the "good step", which shapes a journey to be traced through five substantial books and several maps:

> I was on a summer's beach one blinding day watching the waves unmaking each other, when I became aware of a wave, or a recurrent sequence of waves, with a denser identity and more purposeful momentum than the rest. This appearance … resolved itself under my stare into the fins and backs of two dolphins (or was it three?) … I waded out until they were passing and repassing within a few yards of me; it was still difficult to see the smoothly arching succession of dark presences as a definite number of individuals. Yet their unity with their background was no jellyfish-like dalliance with dissolution; their mode of being was an intensification of

> their medium into alert, reactive self-awareness; they were wave made flesh, with minds solely to ensure the moment-by-moment integration of body and world.
>
> This instance of a wholeness beyond happiness made me a little despondent … [A] dolphin may be its own poem, but we have to find our rhymes elsewhere, between words in literature, between things in science, and our way back to the world involves us in endless proliferation of detours. Let the problem be symbolized by that of taking a single step as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to the wave. Is it possible to think towards a *human* conception of this "good step"? (20; emphasis in original)

This observation of dolphins' shape and movement merging with the waves challenges the limitations inherent in the human "step". Robinson's pilgrimage admits from the outset the difficulty of achieving the dolphins' "moment-by-moment reintegration of body and world", even as striving for that goal is the source of artistic creation.

The integration to be desired here is of biota, or the "animate", and what we normally think of as "inanimate", or abiota. However, Robinson's language testifies to the sea's alert self-awareness in this moment of interaction with the dolphins. The dolphins do not dissolve into the waves, and yet the sea is indistinguishable from the warm, living bodies moving through and with it. The eloquent, yet wordless communication between Robinson, the dolphins, and their element echoes Plumwood as well as Bennett, who recognizes "matter's inherent creativity" (7). Bennett supports her claim by citing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's assertion that embodiment can prompt the discovery "in all *other* objects the miracle of expression" (qtd. in Bennett 7; emphasis added). Though humans are resistant to "seeing ourselves as objects among other objects", as Mary Douglas has observed, the ability to do so, Douglas argues, is essential to any "great revolution of thought" (210). The thought-revolution encouraged in Robinson's work – as when he brings to attention "the unconsidered sustenance we share with the inanimate" (*View* 22) – and in the work of the feminist new materialists considered here, is critical: "to begin to *experience* the relationships between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility" (Bennett 10; emphasis in original). For Robinson, "the task of the artist is to trace the lines of [the] universal cousinage", which links everything contained in the cosmos ("Seism" 9). The cosmos, he notes elsewhere, "is a plenum, a density of interrelationships, endlessly nourished by its own complexity. In such a world, every point is connected to every other point; every event is a starburst of futurity" (*My Time* 97). Nothing less than the fate of creation is at stake.

Ecofeminists seek to dismantle hierarchical structures of thought, and contend that the fate of the environment is inextricably linked to the fate of those "othered" in an exploitative, top-down capitalist system, including women, as Ariel Salleh has explained: "Ecofeminists go beyond dualistic structures by recognizing that ecology and society form a relational web where everything flows bio-energetically in/out of everything else. This ontology of internal relations implies a both/and logic, which means that our epistemology will be a dialectical one dealing with process and contradiction" ("On Production" 211).

This both/and logic that embraces contradiction is evident in Robinson's work, perhaps most vividly in a passage that makes sly (though deliberate) allusion to the famous lines from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself", "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)": "[B]etween the indiscriminate mystic welter and the loveless systems there must be words for my awareness of the material world and my perfect continuity with it. I am the form of the mutual sustaining of my cells; does that reduce me? I see the world, or parts of it, I drink parts of it, parts of it see me, it will drink

me; I am not alone". (*Tales* 35). It is through Robinson's consistent, informing themes of continuity and connection that the implicit gender politics of his writing might be understood.

Here Be Critters

The descriptive force of comparing someone's intelligence to that of a goose or a rock relies on shared assumptions about the constitutive inferiority of the nonhuman to the human. For millennia in the West "dehumanization" has helped define those groups ineligible for inclusion among the fully "civilized", especially women, non-whites, and people of low rank and minimal power, such as slaves and other workers. One of the most influential and insidious binaries organizing privilege is that which places "culture" and "nature" into separate realms, realms traditionally and crucially gendered. Due to their role in reproduction, women are identified with their bodies and the "natural" world, while men are identified with the mind and its abstract, "cultural" activities of philosophy, the arts, and politics. In "Nature's Queer Performativity", Karen Barad examines the ways in which, according to this divide, "nature" and the "natural" are recruited in the policing of bodies and their sexual desires, as in the phrase "acts against nature", used to describe non-heteronormative behaviour. Barad proposes an analysis that accounts for not only "the materializing effects of 'human' bodies but of all matter(ings)/materializations, including the materializing effects of boundary-making practices by which the 'human' and the 'nonhuman' are differentially constituted" (31-32). Barad makes use of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which represented a foundational shift in thinking about sexual difference and gender, arguing that it is through imitative, repetitive performance, and not as a "natural" emergence from a stable self or a biologically predetermined body, that we construct and experience gender. Barad extends this to all phenomena, nonhuman as well as human: "all bodies, not merely human bodies, come to matter through the world's performativity – its iterative intra-activity" (31-32).

Barad's article opens with a 2009 news story about the discovery of a massive amoeba colony in Texan soil. Her ensuing discussion of slime moulds, a category which includes social amoebas, challenges ideas about intentionality, identity, and individualism, when it is revealed that the slime mould is "an organism that morphs from a seemingly uncoordinated group of identical single cells to an aggregate 'slug' with an immune system and other organismic functionality characteristic of multicellular species with different roles played by identical cellular units" ("Nature's" 26). In their indeterminacy, "social amoebas queer the nature of identity, calling into question the individual/group binary" (26). Barad enlists this category-shattering organism's queerness to trouble assumptions, "including the assumed separation between 'the human' and its others" (27). The article goes on to consider other "queer critters", including a dinoflagellate, *Pfisteria piscicida*, whose "very species being is indeterminate" (27). Barad's interest in slime moulds and queer dinoflagellates is shared by Robinson, and for similar reasons. There is evidence that Robinson sent a photocopied picture he had taken of a slime mould to microbiologist Dr Vincent O'Flaherty in the National University of Ireland, Galway, in January 2003. Robinson captions the image, "Critter seen in bog pond, Gleann Clóchan July 99". The photocopy is attached to several newspaper clippings and a printout from a website no longer online, called "Myxo", which says of slime moulds that they are "some of nature's most extraordinary organisms in that they exhibit the characteristics of both fungi and animals". Other cuttings include an *Irish Times* piece by Dick Ahlstrom that describes this kind of "common bacteria that act in an unusual way when they join to form a film" as "actually quite organised colonies that can communicate and act like multicelled organisms" (19); while one of Michael Viney's "Eye on Nature" columns

calls the slime mould "very strange" and "uncanny" and concludes: "It is neither fungus nor animal but shares in the lifestyle of both" (B9).[2]

In light of these testimonies to the "queer" indeterminacies of the slime mould, it is notable that Robinson uses the word "critter" to describe it, as it is often the way in which new materialist feminists refer to those beings that disturb the categories of animate and inanimate. For example, Donna Haraway argues that "things are material, specific, non-self-identical, and semiotically active. In the realm of the living, critter is another name for thing" (Crittercam 119). Barad explains her own use of the term when considering the indeterminate:

> The term "critter" already enacts exclusions of the kind that are being troubled. Critter, in one sense of the term, is an animate being, where the line between "animate" and "inanimate" is taken as given, rather than an effect of particular boundary-drawing practices. On the other hand, "critter" is already internally queer, having contrary associations as a term defined both in contrast to or as distinct from humans (as in its reference to animate nonhumans), and, in relation to humans (e.g., as a term of reprobation or contempt, but also sometimes as term of affection or tenderness). In an important sense then, critters are inherently destabilizing and do not have determinate identities, by definition. ("Nature's" 33)

Barad deems "critters" those agents who give rise to various "uncanny" effects, and she refers to them affectionately as "exceptional comrades" ("Nature's" 29) and "queer co-workers" (33). Similarly, Robinson's expansive sense of inclusion and ability to recognize the independent agency of the nonhuman enables him, for example, to refer to the blight fungus responsible for the Irish potato famine as an "innocent creature" (*Listening* 214). The "informed love" behind such generosity is a kind of self-love, in the best possible sense. Robinson sees the slime mould as crucial to our existence, a creature who shares ancestry with other beings that must be acknowledged and embraced. Robinson entreats us to realize that no divisions between "us" and "them" can be found "written in the stars": "It is … important for us to *feel* this continuity, how it reaches back generation by generation to the rock pools, to the primeval slimes of self-replicating chemicals and perhaps to some extra-terrestrial spawn of earth-life, blowing in the solar wind" (*Last Pool* 286; emphasis added).

Other tiny, usually un-regarded beings of significance to both Barad and Robinson are dinoflagellates (or "dinos"), entities that, like slime moulds, are at once animal-like and plant-like, and yet classifiable as neither plant nor animal. In *Connemara: The Last Pool of Darkness*, Robinson claims of one such creature that "even the single-celled coccolithipore have room for a universe of complexities" (287). This particular dino adds another complexity to its indeterminate being by also partaking of mineral qualities: it is the only phytoplankton that creates around itself a coating of limestone, or calcite, and these plates, or coccoliths are, *inter alia*, what make the white cliffs of Dover (and, indeed, make them white). Other microscopic sea-dwellers also arrest Robinson's attention. In the first volume of the Connemara trilogy, *Listening to the Wind*, in describing the deep history of the formation of a habitable earth, Robinson foregrounds the single-celled foram, "a consequential creature … [that] represent[s] a halfway stage of evolution between bacteria and the animal kingdom" (112). What makes the foram consequential is its vast numbers: "It has been estimated that 1.23 billion tons of foram shells are deposited on the sea floor each year, representing the death of 226 billion billion *individuals* – each one of which had its own life-history, proposed by its sac of DNA, and disposed by the chaos of the sea' (112; emphasis added). By using a locution recalling Thomas á Kempis's famous phrase, "man proposes but god disposes", Robinson's re-casting of theology on a purely material ground places microscopic sea creatures on the same level as "man", while asserting the uniqueness of those in both

categories. This equivalency continues when he imagines the ultimate dissolution of a work of landscape art by Richard Long, its components "eventually [becoming] anonymous contributions to the compilation of the Earth, like the soft bones of stillborn babies rotted into that knoll by the seashore, or the uncountable forams heaped onto the tombolo. We find ourselves in a world compacted of our forebears" (116). Our forebears are both human and nonhuman. The work of art's remains are as anonymous as those of forgotten babies and of the billions of microscopic lives equally as invisible to us, but all are held in reverence by Robinson.

Robinson shares with Patricia Yeager, an understanding that "we have grown myopic about the role that seas and oceans play in creating ordinary histories and cultures" (524). He is also aware of the history of privileging *terra firma* over "valueless" bodies of water. It is instructive to recall, for example, that the word "lake" is from the Latin "lacuna", a word also carried over into English to indicate a void or vacancy.[3] Despite his reputation as a mapper of the landscape, Robinson's most persuasive instances of existence as a compound of radical individuality and irreducible communality, of complexity and simplicity – recalling Salleh's ecofeminist epistemology of "process and contradiction" – are most frequently found in the sea rather than on land. One more example is barnacle larvae, another constituent of plankton, of which he asks, "how is it that minute creatures can be so complex, that such almost impalpable parcels can hold so much – anatomies, sense, instincts – and in their short lives can go through such profound recognition of themselves?" (*Last Pool* 286). The answer he gives, "that seen from the right perspective these creatures are huge", relies on the insights provided by quantum physics, the field in which Karen Barad has received her formal training. Haraway, another scientist prominent in theorizing ecofeminist new materialism, has also recently recognized the power of a marine metaphor, Eva Hayward's "tentacularity", a quality shared by octopi, squid, and cuttlefish, and which evokes "themes of ongoing looping, becoming-with, and polymorphism" (*Trouble* 188). Just as all bodies are polymorphous, from, in the case of mammals, hair follicles and the mites that live in them to the alimentary system and its "gut" flora, so is there no single authoritative perspective from which it is possible to definitively count swimming dolphins or to determine where their bodies end and the element they move in begins. Despite the popularity of the inherently lyrical dolphin as the creature most readily associated with Robinson's work, the mysterious and faceless critter, the less cuddly slime-mould emerges as a fitter emblem for his ethic and aesthetic of dissolving those implicitly gendered distinctions between the human and the nonhuman that enable, among other things, ecological destruction.

Erotic Matter(s)

Just as gender is a social and cultural construct, so is "nature". As Kate Soper has observed, "It is through the idea of 'nature' [that] we conceptualize what is 'other' to ourselves" (15), including sexual "others", such as members of the LGBTQ community, whose oppression is justified on the grounds of "acts against nature", as Barad has noted, and women, whose inferiority is alleged on the basis of their closeness to nature. The critters found in both Barad's and Robinson's writing enjoy a particularly instructive in-between-ness, a protean embodiment without gender and an ability to multiply using radically non-heterosexual means. Robinson approaches these creatures, and everything in the cosmos, not only with "informed love", but also, frequently, with an erotic appreciation. In a list of "emancipatory strategies" suggested by ecofeminist Gretchen Legler "to reimagine nature and human relationships with the natural world", there are several employed (as well as implied) in Robinson's work, as should already be evident, including: "'Re-mything' nature as a 'bodied subject"; erasing "self-other (human/nonhuman, I/Thou) distinctions"; employing "an ethic of

caring friendship or a 'loving eye'"; unseating "'mind' knowledge from a privileged position … positing the notion that 'bodies' know" (think of the knowledge gained from the "good step", for example); and "re-eroticizing human relationships" with nature (230). Robinson consistently unseats from its privileged position the human intellect, traditionally coded as "masculine". The intellect and all of its achievements are not separable from the natural, even as the cultural is the source of violent, aggressive destruction against the natural world:

> A new species has arrived, carrying a dreadful weapon, the intellect. An arms race has begun, the axe evolves from stone to bronze to iron to steel. Great woods with all their sighs and cries go down into silence; the animals succumb: yesterday the bear, wolf, boar, deer, eagle, and today the grouse, the golden plover … Intellect is a new factor, arising out of nature but wrecking its equilibria. (*Listening* 56)

In place of violence, Robinson encourages an ethic of care and love, but not love as an entirely abstract or strictly emotional experience. It is material and materializing.

As noted, in *My Time in Space* Robinson says that the cosmos is constituted of a web of interconnection, that every point is connected to every other point, assertions of interest themselves, but for the purposes of this essay, these observations are also significant as they are made only a page before Robinson addresses the criticism sometimes made of his early work that he makes recourse to traditional patriarchal associations of the land and nature with women. In graceful response to this criticism he says, "to think of the land as woman is to strengthen an unthinking identification of woman with the autonomic side of her being" (101). While he worries in this instance about a tendency to use the language of the erotic and personal when engaging with the material world, his "alternative" is to continue a practice of intimate physical contact through "the act of walking":

> To me, walking is a way of expressing, acting out, a relationship to the physical world. … This sort of walking is an intensive cognitive and physical involvement with the terrain, close to but not lapsing into identification with it, not a mysticism; and not a matter of getting from A to B but of lingering, re-visiting, cross-hatching an area with one's most alert and best-informed attention. (103)

A "lingering" and "alert" physical and cognitive involvement, despite Robinson's anxiety, evokes the erotic, or, at least, its ideal. While informed by many intellectual practices, including science and history, his knowledge of the terrain is ultimately and primarily carnal. It is important to note that Robinson's own gender expression is not especially "male", at least not in the most restrictive, traditional sense, and his gendering of the land – which *is* undeniable and sometimes sexualized – does not resort to metaphors of conquest, appropriation, or penetration. His relationship to the material is one of attraction and desire, which grows out of respect for and intimate understanding of natural processes.

Writing about Robinson's erotic response to and engagement with landscape, Moynagh Sullivan argues that the "feminine" in his work is not Mother Earth or even Mother Ireland (205), but an in-between-ness, a border *between* subjects. Sullivan uses Bracha Ettinger's theory of the matrixial, an originary feminine dimension that recedes in the shadow of the phallic. The theory shares a great deal with Kristeva's semiotic chora, an important difference being that for Ettinger, this substrate *is* accessible to the sane, articulate subject, especially through art. Robinson's own career as a visual artist, while living in London in the years before he moved to Ireland, has developed his haptic powers of observation, honed a visceral intelligence of feeling, in every sense of the word. Sullivan sees the matrixial, a "trans-subjective psychic sphere", throughout Robinson's work: "Robinson's keen listening to

waves on many frequencies, resulting in mapping and texts, works to produce an erotically charged matrixial dimensionality of the spaces he walks" (206.) According to Sullivan, Robinson's "walk-art-text practice opens him – and us – to the sphere prior to the identity marked as singular" (215). Openness, plurality, and the denial of constructed boundaries are what inform the erotics as well as the aesthetics of Robinson's writing about the natural world. The erotic charge of partiality and connection, of the incomplete and the open, acknowledges and requires physical contact. As Salleh notes, the derogated, "essentialist" work traditionally relegated to women, of loving and physical nurturance, can in fact be transgressively anti-essentialist: "Paradoxically, holding is the ultimate expression of adaptability. As opposed to the physicist's separation of time and space, interconnectedness is the material/reality of those who 'hold things together'" (*Ecofeminism* 144). Far from inconsequential, "holding" is essential to refiguring subject/object relations, as "it exemplifies a strong, decentred subject" (*Ecofeminism* 147). Through his work, both textual and political, Robinson throws his arms around the world.

Sullivan sees Robinson's immersion in the cosmos as informing his understanding of all of its components being decentred partial-subjects, partial-objects (203). Undermining constructions of self and other, subject and object, human and nonhuman means re-configuring the location and exercise of desire, central to received and delimiting ideas about gender and sexuality. When Barad was asked in interview to articulate the gender dimension of her theory of "agential realism" (in brief, the performative and shared agency we have with everything around us, including what cannot be seen), she replied:

> Eros, desire, life forces run through everything, not only specific body parts or specific kinds of engagement between body parts. Matter itself is not a substrate or a medium for the flow of desire. Materiality itself is always already a desiring mechanism, a reiterative reconfiguring, energized and energizing, enlivened and enlivening. I have been particularly interested in how matter comes to matter, how matter makes itself felt. This is a feminist project whether or not there are any women or people or any other macroscopic beings in sight. Along with other new materialist feminists, … feeling, desiring, and experiencing are not singular characteristics or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, years, and remembers. ("Matter feels")

Barad offers clear access to an appreciation of Robinson's work as a "feminist project", even when women or other macroscopic beings – or even attractive microscopic beings – are not in evidence. Materialization, one way of understanding what Robinson means when he refers to finding his "way back to the world", shapes his pilgrimage across the face of what he calls "broken, blessed, Pangaea" in his first book about the Irish environment (*Pilgrimage* 21). The earth's blessedness and the brokenness are not separable qualities. The material world enabled the development of the ideological and technical weapons now poised to destroy it, the result of attempts to sever the connections that "hold things together".

Like feminist new materialists, Robinson recognizes a radical subjectivity:

> Everything is burning with particularities: *I* fly like this, *I* jump like this, *I* eat like this, *my* wings have six red spots on back, nothing else is like *me*! And of each of these tiny egos, there are millions of replicas. They fly up from disturbed bushes like the contents of a jewellery shop fleeing a blaze; they swarm and pluck at me in their paroxysms of individuation; am I not going to mention them, the small copper butterfly I saw at Clochán an Airgiud, the unspotted form of the six-spot burnet, the

> cinnabar moths, the sapphire-bright common blues? (*Labyrinth* 438; emphasis in original)

Robinson counts the burnet's spots, appreciates the distinctiveness of another's shade of blue, as the god of the Christian Bible counts the hairs on each human's head, according to St Luke's gospel, which exhorts followers to believe that "the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many flocks of sparrows". But Robinson's loving and minute attention is not a demonstration of his recognizing humans as more precious than a flock of sparrows, but to point out the fact of our inseparability from all matter. Robinson is emphatically uninterested in the male-coded value of transcendence, identified as a destructive patriarchal tenet early in this essay. He privileges, instead, intimacy and equality, the downward look, the earthbound step, the tiny, neglected detail, whether a detail of topography, history, or individual experience – very generously understood – especially of the forgotten, the silenced. The silent and silenced animal functions as a figure for ecocritical and ecological considerations of the interrelation between culture and nature, a relation of urgent significance, as an increasingly "masculine" belligerence currently dominating public policy in the Western world that dismisses "weak", "feminine" concerns for the environment. Robinson's own radical particularity sets him apart from other ecocritical or "nature" writers. His unique sensitivities and training have always made categorising his work impossible. The rest of the philosophical world that engages with the environment and all beings in it, including the exciting and challenging work of feminist new materialists, is only starting to catch up to what Robinson has been doing for decades. As he said to this author after reading a draft of this essay, "I have always been an ecofeminist".

Notes

[1] 'The Dolphin in Its Wave', Statement to the Jury, Madrid, 3 March 1988. Tim Robinson archive, James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway, folder P10/3/4/1. I would like to thank the Tim Robinson archivist, Aisling Keane, for her help with my research, and the Moore Institute at NUI Galway for supporting me as a Research Fellow in May 2017.

[2] Tim Robinson archive, folder P120/3/48/4.

[3] My thanks to Professor Tadhg Foley for this observation as well as other insightful commentary on early drafts of this essay.

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