

“This page faintly stained with / green”: Compost Aesthetics in John Steffler’s That Night We Were Ravenous

Adam Beardsworth

Volume 39, Number 1, 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1062364ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1062364ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Beardsworth, A. (2014). “This page faintly stained with / green”: Compost Aesthetics in John Steffler’s That Night We Were Ravenous. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 39(1).
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1062364ar>

Article abstract

This essay examines how John Steffler’s poetry collection *That Night We Were Ravenous* (1998) destabilizes the humanist impulse to position the “authentic” subject at the core of ecological concerns by employing a compost aesthetic that enacts the innately fragmented nature of human subjectivity. It contends that, for Steffler, the poem is its own ecosystem, one that sits in precarious balance with the world around it. The poems in this collection are exploratory rather than expository; their attempts to discover the self in nature are as ephemeral, slippery, and paradoxical as the language that gives them life. Instead of declaiming poetry as a resource that will allow a return to a utopian space, Steffler’s ecological poems position the human subject as a composite of usable waste attuned to the precarious chaos of nature.

“This page faintly stained with / green”:
Compost Aesthetics in John Steffler’s
That Night We Were Ravenous

ADAM BEARDSWORTH

I N HIS POEM “Cedar Cove,” written about a Western Newfoundland beach notorious for the piles of debris that collect along its shoreline, John Steffler finds an analogy for the problem of selfhood in the wreckage he encounters; he writes, “All day we scatter / ourselves through the noise / and whiteness, learning the thousand / ways things can be taken / apart and reassigned” (8). The self he envisions is not one that finds harmony in nature; rather, his experience testifies to the impossibility of achieving harmony in a hostile environment, a place where “the wind will not let you speak . . . let you think or stand straight” (8). Steffler’s metaphors of self-fragmentation, familiar conceits in his 1998 collection *That Night We Were Ravenous*, destabilize the humanist impulse to position the “authentic” human subject at the core of ecological concerns. Anticipating Jed Rasula’s contention in *This Compost* (2002) that poems ought to be thought of “as ecosystems, precariously adjusted to the surrounding biomass” (7), Steffler’s vision of subjectivity as a composite of usable waste attuned to the chaos of the ecological foregrounds the precarious position of the human in nature. Often considered the locus of romantic alienation, impoverished industry, and antiquated rural values because of its dependence upon landscape, Atlantic Canadian poetry has been charged with parochialism. Steffler’s poetry deconstructs this nature/culture binary and proposes a more fluid system of poetic exchange, one that draws upon, and recycles, romantic literary depictions of Canadian wilderness, cultural constructions of Atlantic Canadian life, and political dispositions toward marginalized regions. For Steffler, the poem is its own ecosystem that sits in precarious balance with the world around it; as such, it serves as a form of exploration, where attempts to position the self in nature are as ephemeral, slippery, and paradoxical as the language that gives the poem life.

Each of *That Night We Were Ravenous's* four sections employs distinct tropes — of hunting, being hunted, homelessness, and estrangement. The collection positions the tension between self, wreckage, and the imaginative desire to give order to these events as a form of composting that aims to reactivate the tradition of wilderness writing, both in its tropic and formal organization and in its kinetic attentiveness to the chaos, disruption, and regeneration of hostile ecologies. As Steffler's persona makes us aware, this desire to relinquish the anthropocentric position of the self within the natural order is its own form of violence. The self in the poem is subject to a dialectical tension as it attempts to relinquish its centrifugal position as arbiter of a harmonious vision of nature. While Steffler's speaker never fully relinquishes his subject position, the dialectical violence he experiences forces an encounter with the painful cleavage between nature as an authentic space and the desire to represent its authenticity in language. Steffler's compost poetics, or rather his poetics of ecological fragmentation, thus work to define nature as a volatile space, one of decay and renewal that recognizes how being at home in the world is, paradoxically, defined by an incommensurable feeling of homelessness.

The concept of literature as a form of compost is not a new one. Henry David Thoreau, for instance, writing in the nineteenth century, claims that "decayed literature makes the richest of all soils" (qtd. in Rasula 1). Thoreau recognized that the process of composition was akin to the natural composting he saw in the New England woods. Each new insight demanded the reuse of a previously conceived idea drawn from the literature, and the nature, that he surrounded himself with. His belief in the use of decayed writing marks an important turn in American literature, wherein the poem is thought to be less that which makes the human distinct from the natural world than that which demonstrates a connection between language as an organic entity that transforms with time and perspective, and the transformative organic world. As Thoreau's friend Emerson writes, "A rhyme in one of our sonnets should not be less pleasing than the iterated nodes of a seashell, or the resembling differences of a group of flowers" ("The Poet"). Emerson's understanding of the correlation between language and nature affirms his belief in the fragmentary and symbolic qualities of identity. As he writes in his essay "The Poet,"

we are symbols, and inhabit symbols; workman, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and, being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object.

The ecological disposition of Thoreau and Emerson amounts to what Max Oelschlager calls “a defense of cosmos, not scenery” (qtd. in Rasula 6). Their mutual interest in establishing an environmental consciousness is predicated upon their understanding of the self as matter, a compost of language, symbol, and physiology. As such, they anticipate theoretical challenges to the self as a stable signifier that are more fully realized in the postmodernism of the mid-twentieth century but that are also clear in certain strains of nineteenth-century American poetry. For Gary Snyder, who asserts that “all our poems are leavings,” poetry ought to be seen as an “ecological survival technique” that “does not impose order on a chaotic universe, but reflects its own wildness back” (*Place and Space* 174). In other words, the difficulty of pinning down language reflects the unpredictability of our experience in Nature. Snyder’s contemporary Charles Olson preached a similar dispersal of the self in his essay “Projective Verse.” The legacy of Black Mountain poetics, he writes, is one that demands “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul. . . . For man is himself an object” (395). For poets such as Olson, Robert Creeley, and Robert Duncan, the idea of “composition by field” (*Olson* 387), which opposes traditional measure and closed forms, aims to transfer the kinetic energy of the image through the poet and onto the page. As Olson demonstrates in his *Maximus Poems*, there is an essential relationship between composition by field and the notion of compost; his fragmentary work “reactivates such particles of archaic texts in a terrain that engages readerly energies in their full proprioceptive stamina, overcoming the restrictions implicit in generic frames” (Rasula 11). The relationship between poetry and the environment in projective poetry is thus one of dispersal and disappearance, of recycling and alienation, rather than one that testifies to a coherent unity between the biosphere and the imagination. Or, in simpler terms, poetry is defined by what

Wendell Berry calls “the paradox that one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of one’s partiality” (303).

For Steffler, the tradition of American wilderness writing appears to be particularly important. Unlike the Black Mountain poets, including Olson and Creeley, and their Canadian counterparts in Tish and other radical poetic movements, Steffler never attempts to fully relinquish the egocentric lyrical voice. Indeed, the primary tension in *That Night We Were Ravenous* is between the desire to relinquish the self and the inability to fully do so. Steffler’s compost aesthetic, rather than attempting to bridge the gap between self, history, and nature, explores the gap itself. As such, it positions encounters with nature as traumatic or beyond linguistic symbolization. By continually exploring the gap between the self and authentic nature, Steffler’s work exposes a vision of nature, common in the contemporary neoliberal rhetoric of “green” living, as an object of dangerous ideological fetishization, one that obscures the urgent need for a more immanent understanding of the ecological. His poetry therefore takes on a political dimension through its probing of the untenable relationship between nature as ideological construct and nature as unrepresentable space.

Steffler’s poetry challenges constructs of ecological balance by enacting the anxiety that results from trying to relinquish utopian ideals of ecological harmony. In particular, he engages with specific strains of environmental writing, especially those associated with deep ecology, which call for a return to nature that recognizes the fundamental interrelatedness of all natural systems — a position that “construes our human identity and purpose essentially in terms of our relationship with the natural world, and, ultimately, with the cosmos, rather than in terms of our gender or class, for instance” (Mathews 219-20). While Steffler’s work does not deny such interrelatedness, it questions the very idea of nature as an authentic space. His poems imply that seeing nature in this manner is a form of fetishistic disavowal predicated upon the guilt generated by inaction in the face of ecological crisis. As Slavoj Žižek points out, such fetishistic disavowal is dangerous insofar as it is reassuring:

We like to be guilty since, if we are guilty, it all depends on us. We pull the strings of the catastrophe, so we can also save ourselves simply by changing our lives. What is really hard for us (at least in the West) to accept is that we are reduced to the role of a passive observer who sits and watches what our fate will be. To avoid this

impotence, we engage in frantic, obsessive activities. We recycle old paper, we buy organic food, we install long-lasting light bulbs — whatever — just so we can be sure that we are doing something. (“O Earth, O Pale Mother”)

Steffler’s poetry attempts to avoid this type of fetishistic disavowal. Failing to do so is tantamount to embracing nature as a utopian ideological construct. As Žižek writes, ideology “is precisely such a reduction to the simplified ‘essence’ that conveniently forgets the ‘background noise’ which provides the density of its actual meaning. Such an erasure of the ‘background noise’ is the very core of utopian dreaming” (*Living in the End Times* 6). Steffler’s poetry, by emphasizing the fractured relation between the human and the ecological, instead of providing a utopian vision of the wilderness, amplifies the background noise that, in turn, degrades holistic visions of ecological interrelatedness. By challenging the authority of nature as ideology, Steffler elucidates what remains of the human in the wild when stripped of preconceived notions of natural belonging. As such, Steffler’s work, paradoxically, denaturalizes nature; it challenges and disavows “our attempts to dominate the earth and to free ourselves from nature by giving it a meaning — that is, by denaturing it” (Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation* 149).

In *That Night We Were Ravenous*, Steffler confronts the tension between the desire to assert a sustainable self by way of the modern lyric poem and the chaotic natural forces that threaten to decompose that self. The collection is comprised of four distinct sections, each conveying a sense of estrangement. “In a Makeshift Blind” evokes hunting for selfhood from a liminal position; “Still Loose and Circling You” is pervaded by anxiety as Steffler’s speaker is stalked by memories of a troubled past; “Borrowed Home” posits the self as itinerant while utilizing encounters with ancient monuments as symbols for a desired permanence; and “Animal” conjures being as predicated upon a menacing and predatory instinct that lingers beyond social constructions of nature.

In the first section, Steffler links his composition style to the idea of composting through tropes of destruction, decay, and renewal, as well as through the sparse lines of his free verse. The opening poem, “Start of a Trail,” which establishes the collection’s extended metaphor of hunting by inviting readers into the wilderness, both physical and psychological, that it explores, offers little more than a fragmentary catalogue of items seen on a walk in the woods:

a flattened bird's nest

a cleft moose print

clusters of rose-purple
cones in the black spruce boughs
gum-beaded
dusted
with their own yellowish dust

good tender ache of things
needing to open. (3)

While the images chosen by Steffler are characteristic of Newfoundland ecology, they also evoke a tension between presence and absence, or between loss and becoming. The book's opening image, the bird's nest, has been "flattened" and is no longer the locus of a nurturing home. As such, it corroborates the book's preoccupation with the search for a home within the wild. The nest is an iconic image of the natural world, one that is meticulously constructed and that connotes fertility and regeneration. By stamping it out in the opening lines of the collection, Steffler signals his desire to deconstruct conventional notions of environmental kinship and foregrounds homelessness as a condition of wilderness experience. This search for a stable home in the wild is further complicated by the "cleft moose print." The print is a trace of meaning, a language that by its very existence displaces the signified (or the moose) whose absence it denotes. This displacement of the material object in the act of representation constitutes what Maurice Blanchot refers to as "the work of death." According to Blanchot, "it is accurate to say that when I speak, death speaks in me. My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address. . . . Death alone allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning" ("Literature and the Right to Death" 323-24). The image of the moose print signifies the process Blanchot speaks of; its presence speaks to the absence of the animal it denotes. It is, in a sense, the language of the moose, the symbolic trace left behind after it asserts itself as present in the material world. In Blanchot's terms, the print itself, once evoked by Steffler, is also absent, killed by the act

of naming that removes it from the wild and situates it in the vocabulary of symbolic representation.

While the work of death allows words to take on their own material presence, apart from the figures and images they represent, it also reinforces the distress and alienation experienced by Steffler's speaker as he struggles to satiate an impossible desire for authentic nature. For Steffler, evoking the materiality of words, rather than their symbolic resonance, is integral to his compost aesthetic. The paratactic use of sparse imagery within the material free-verse poem posits the speaker's relation to the natural world as one that lacks cohesion; while the poem, and many subsequent poems in the collection, express a longing for integration with the natural world, the images of fragmentation and loss, along with the fissures of white space between the material words, serve as testimonies to the interruptive and protean qualities of experience. In "Start of a Trail," for instance, the poem's tension between stasis and transition is indicative of the "good tender ache of things / needing to open." This struggle for presence is both painful and natural, as conveyed through Steffler's oxymoronic use of language that implies both organic renewal and rupture. The tension between stasis and transition demands a violence exacted against the self attempting to make meaning out of the symbols of nature, an "ache" that forces the individual to confront an intrinsically disruptive relationship with the natural world where the desire to attain or express presence, or to "open" the self into a more unified relationship with the ecological, remains always just out of reach. Indeed, it is this painful process, rather than its harmonious conclusion, that is paradoxically conveyed as "good" and "tender." Significantly, the need to open is never satisfied in the poem; as such, it anticipates the rift between desire and insatiability that drives the collection's thematic tension.

Steffler's compost aesthetic enables this poetics of disjunction by emphasizing the malleable nature of both existence and the poetic image. As Jed Rasula claims, this process, akin to the act of echolocation utilized by species such as bats and porpoises to orient themselves in their environments, is at once a natural part of poetry and an alienating force:

Poetry is a kind of echo-location. But since its medium is language, its repertoire of echoes is bewilderingly diverse. The greediest of gifts, the most beneficent of appropriations, poetry is language dis-

closed as paradox, where naming does not re-present but dissolves and then reforms creation, where the speaker too is dissolved into the act of speech and reemerges *alieniloquium*, as another, a reader or listener who is in turn displaced from self-assurance, forced to take up residence in the strange. Poetry is this strangely familiar realm of estrangements, its uncanniness preternaturally arousing a maximum alertness, but an alertness achieved paradoxically, by dissolving the resources of intellection and identity. (8)

This paradoxical estrangement caused by trying to find ontological stability by using poetic language is what Steffler's work conveys. In doing so, however, it also acknowledges that the repercussions of such dissolution of the "resources of intellection and identity," while affirming identity as dispersed, may carry with it the burden of melancholy that comes with finding oneself permanently estranged from authentic being. Nevertheless, as Žižek argues, it is precisely this assumption of an irremediable gap between self, nature, and representation that is required for a productive relationship with the ecological:

If we grasp the ecological crisis as a traumatic kernel to be kept at a distance by obsessive activity, or as the bearer of a message, a call to find new roots in Nature, we blind ourselves in both cases to the irreducible gap separating the real from its modes of symbolization. The only proper attitude is that which fully assumes this gap . . . without endeavoring to suspend it through fetishistic disavowal, to keep it concealed through obsessive activity, or to reduce the gap between the real and symbolic by projecting a (symbolic) message into the real. (qtd. in Kerridge 3)

Assuming the gap, therefore, means accepting the compost nature of identity. Accepting that nature can never be fully represented linguistically is itself an ontological gesture: it demonstrates that an authentic relationship with nature means, paradoxically, embracing nature as un-representable and, in turn, contending with the anxiety that such a realization provokes.

The desire to assume this gap by adopting a compost sensibility is apparent in other poems in the first section. In "Cedar Cove," for example, Steffler's speaker, who we are meant to presume is the same voice over the course of the collection, ruminates, "If your wharf is washed away / it will come to Cedar Cove. . . . If your boat goes down it will sail to Cedar / Cove piece by piece. / And your uncle, should

he not come back / from his walk on Cape St. George / Will be found grinning among the glitter of barkless roots / Lathes struts stays / stringers and frayed rope” (7). Here, Steffler uses a Newfoundland beach famous for the piles of debris that wash up on its shore as a metaphor for the decomposition and recomposition of permeable objects. The “lathes struts stays / stringers and frayed rope” are the wreckage of destroyed human structures; their appearance scattered on the shore suggests a violent relationship between the human and natural worlds. The lost wharf breaks the agrarian connection between the human and the sea insofar as the wharf is the traditional hub of the fish harvest. Similarly, the destroyed boat, and the unspoken human tragedy that it implies, evokes the embattled relationship with the sea familiar to North Atlantic fishing communities. The lost uncle, taken inauspiciously while walking along the cape, completes the metaphor of human dissolution, from the agrarian, to the technological, to the actual physical being. The fact that his body resurfaces in Cedar Cove suggests the decomposition and reconstitution of matter; however, his body is not positioned as more significant than the other matter washed along the beach. Instead the drowned uncle is equal to the other forms of detritus found awash on the beach. Even the name Cedar Cove itself, “where no / cedars have ever grown,” implies the fallible and culturally determined reality of ecological constructs. We are told “the wind will not let you speak / in Cedar Cove, which could / be called Deaf Cove / or Lobotomy Cove.” Nature’s presence is here portrayed as oppressive, physically dominating the possibility of lucid thought, as the “lobotomy” metaphor implies. In the presence of such potent natural force, Steffler’s speaker reflects

All day we scatter
ourselves through the noise

and whiteness, learning the thousand
ways things can be taken
apart and reassigned. (8)

Overwhelmed by the encounter with nature’s violence, the coherent self is metaphorically scattered and composted just as the wharf, boat, and uncle were physically destroyed in the poem’s first half. At this point of decomposition, Steffler refers to the potency of nature as “noise / and whiteness.” These nondescript nouns indicate the difficulty, especially in

such moments of trauma, of representing the natural world symbolically. As such, the poem positions an authentic encounter with nature as akin to the Lacanian “Real.” In Jacques Lacan’s triadic order, as expressed in his *Écrits*, existence takes place on three distinct registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Daily experience exists within the Symbolic realm, insofar as experience is primarily mediated through language and other forms of symbolic representation. The Real is that which cannot be accounted for symbolically. In Lacanian terms, the Real is primarily an experience of trauma and includes formative moments such as birth, substantial pain, and even love. In poems such as “Cedar Cove,” Steffler aligns the Real with an authentic, and hostile, nature. Far from being a space of harmony and interrelatedness, nature is figured as a space of trauma and alienation. The poem, as an act of symbolization doomed to inadequately account for authentic experience, aims to “assume the gap” of the Real without ever compensating for its essential absence. As such, the poem is built of recycled images, always removed from the material signified these images attempt to account for.

This tension between absence and symbolization recurs in other poems from the first section, including “Blurred Wreath,” where the speaker writes,

I talk to a puddle
of black peat, perfect slurry of marrow and earth’s
juice. Reflective dents on its surface are
pools in the old tracks of moose — clear
trickle at one moss lip — its roots
deep in the mountain’s body. (14)

Here, the self is seen in the imperfect reflection found in the “black peat, perfect slurry of marrow and earth’s / juice.” The reflection implies the incompleteness of the self; it is seen rather as an image broken by environmental conditions. The fragility of the self is heightened by the fact that the reflection is embedded in the peat — an image (likely indebted to the work of Irish poet Seamus Heaney) of composted history, recycled and altered by the course of time. While the speaker peers into this history, the ephemerality of his reflection suggests that he is also fundamentally alienated, as a conscious and sentient being, from the more coherent version of self he encounters in his memory. Just as the moose, whose tracks the puddle has formed in, is once again absent

from the scene, the speaker experiences his own sense of disconnection from the wider process of nature. He locates himself in nature as a broken image, ephemerally reflected in a shallow puddle that, presumably, will evaporate. The moss the tracks are located in, however, has roots that run “deep in the mountain’s body,” a line that juxtaposes the ephemeral image of the self in the puddle with a more extensive and permanent ecological realm.

A similar scenario occurs in the section’s titular poem, in which the speaker chooses to “abandon the corporation of myself. / I do not sit down at my desk at nine o’clock, / I do not dig into the pile of unfinished poems” (25). Instead, while asserting that “[m]an-made gods always / want us to kill ourselves,” he spends the morning watching nature from behind a pile of debris he identifies as a “makeshift blind,” similar to those conventionally used for hunting and photography:

This morning I lie in a makeshift blind and watch
what the animal does.

He wanders around in crowds of air I cannot

distinguish him from the worn leaves rubbing,
the yellows.

The smell of the earth is the same
as his skin. (25)

The view from the “makeshift blind,” which evokes the blindness of the culturally constructed position from which he envisions the natural world, fails to provide him with a clearer view of his ontological condition. Instead, it highlights his estrangement from the environment. Sitting in the blind, the speaker envies the animal’s intimate connection to the land, where “the smell of the earth is the same / as his skin.” The solubility of the border between animal and environment reinforces the speaker’s alienation behind the blind, where he is insulated from the biotic community. The fact that he sits in a blind normally used for either hunting or photography — acts predicated upon a human desire to capture and use elements of the natural world — further implies that anthropocentric power is, in part, responsible for his liminality.

This experience of exile, which recurs in each of the collection’s subsequent sections, carries with it a profound sense of sadness. Acknowledging the impossibility of authentically representing nature means admitting the implicitly fractured and protean quality of being.

For Steffler's speaker, this means that the experience of the natural always falls short of possession of that experience. Peter Schwenger describes this in phenomenological terms as a lapse between perception and possession:

there is a melancholy associated with physical objects. That melancholy differs from the traditional lament for the ephemeral object. . . . The melancholy I am speaking of underlies the very moment when "now you see it"; it is generated by the act of perception, perception of the object by the subject. This perception, always falling short of full possession, gives rise to a melancholy that is felt by the subject and is ultimately *for* the subject. It is we who are to be lamented, and not the objects that evoke this emotion in us without ever feeling it themselves. (1-2)

As *That Night We Were Ravenous* continues into its second section, the sense of despair exposed by the rift between nature and being, or between perception and possession, becomes a melancholy felt by the subject for the subject. Entitled "Still Loose and Circling You," the second section moves from exterior to interior environments and explores the relationship between personal history and ontological homelessness. The agent who is "still loose and circling" the subject is predominantly the speaker's past, which stalks his present and becomes a source of menace. As he contemplates in "For My Execution," a poem in which he envisions his childhood farm in Southern Ontario as the ideal place for a violent death, the past, like compost, is dredged up as a material element that informs the present empirically. The speaker chooses for his execution the place "where the barn used to stand, a zone / where the grass rippled and posed like a handsome animal, / sleek on a century of barnyard loam" (29). The loam recalls the peat of "Blurred Wreath" and once again evokes the idea of history as compost, preserved and transformed by the inexorable march of time. The speaker's meditation about the past leads him to recall a photograph, itself a mediated representation that exists as a trace of the actual event. In the photo,

my sister, housecoated, holding the camera, her neck
and shoulders bitten away by the sun, the milk-house
beside her with its unused well under
a clutter of planks,
the fieldstone throat I would peer down, into

the past, watching a pebble fall — once in a drought,
to water the garden, my father pumped out
its stench, its corpses, liquid blots of fur. (29)

As he peers into the well, and into his psychological past, he finds he cannot retrieve a cohesive vision. Although the well, made of “field-stone” and located within an agrarian setting, is more conventionally associated with sustenance and regeneration, here it stands as a portal deep into a dark and rotting pit. What Steffler’s speaker locates is the “stench” and “corpses” of the past, returned as compost in a manner that disturbs his vision of the present like the reverberations on the surface caused by the pebble he drops into the water. Acknowledging that this was “a spot I wanted only to leave,” he nevertheless resolves to “kneel and wait” for the execution he has chosen. The resolve for death in this locus of contestation and historical confusion signifies an acceptance that relinquishing the self into the post-mortem of compost and regeneration is his only authentic opportunity for commiseration with the ecological. Indeed it is the mucky and pungent transformation that gives immediacy to the composition of his present self. The past informs his present insofar as it affects his state of mind. As such, the past in the poem exists atemporally: it is dispersed across the space of his subjectivity. His self is mitigated by random and wild intrusions of the past, intrusions that challenge the stability of that selfhood in the first section and refigure it as the composite of disparate temporal and psychological moments in the second.

Meditation on the past, therefore, enhances the experience of alienation felt by the speaker. Lost both in the actual wilderness and in the wilderness of his past, he recognizes that authentic experience beyond the disjunctions of everyday life is impossible. As such, his lament in this section is less for the impossibility of commiserating with the natural world than it is for the impossibility of feeling at home in his own skin; or, as Schwenger claims, it is no longer a melancholy of the subject for the lost object but a melancholy of the subject for the lost subject.

This loss of subjectivity mediated through the experience of a hostile and violent natural world persists in the second section. In “Walls of Sound,” for instance, we are told

crickets can't stand it in Newfoundland,
 so you need a good house there to keep
 the silence out, the buzz of "folly! folly!"
 your ears make in an empty space. (32)

Here, it is the absence of nature and the idea of silence that torments the speaker. The "empty space" caused by the absence of sound figures again as a confrontation with the traumatic Real. Incapable of filling that space psychologically, he aims to represent it symbolically, in this case as the absence of crickets. The image of crickets, however absent, ironically evokes the sound of crickets, a sound that acts as a figurative bulwark against the unsettling silence the speaker laments. By the end of the poem, he concludes that the best stay against absence is to "Build your walls thick there and / stay indoors, filling the lighted air / with the music of men" (32). Here the speaker chooses to insulate himself from the trauma of real nature, anticipating Žižek's claim that "we should alienate ourselves more from nature so we become aware of the utter contingency, the fragility of our natural being" ("Wake Up and Smell the Apocalypse"). Welcoming the sounds of the human in the face of the unrepresentable silence of nature functions in this poem, where the speaker is made aware of his fragile and insecure ontological status, as an act of self-alienation, one that again seeks to mitigate the melancholy caused by the subject's loss of a stable identity.

Similar moments of anxiety recur as the section progresses. In the titular poem, "Still Loose and Circling You," the speaker is stalked by personal history, as "the sweet history of earth pours in, turning / the curtain aside in a gust of your own childhood, / still loose and circling you" (37). In "Dark Room," he recalls "trunks stuffed with human / skins I could hold up like clothes and recognize" (39), and in "March 22" he imagines how a "hawk circles on heavy wings, thinking of fruit / of another kind" (41). In each case, he is stalked by either the fragments of personal history (represented by the gust that blows in his childhood memories and the clothes that unfold like human skins) and by the violence of the natural world (as signified by the hawk circling its prey). By the end of this section, the search for authentic experience within both the natural world and personal history has pushed the speaker to the realization that such experience exists only in the trauma of the Real, beyond the limits of linguistic representation. The compost of

material experience and psychological representation, however protean and fragmentary, is its own form of ontology.

Such a realization demands recognition of the relationship between ontology and melancholy. As Elaine Scarry theorizes in *The Body in Pain*, this relationship is facilitated by the gap between language and representation, a gap that disappears only in moments of extreme pain or, more ominously, in death. For Scarry, the kinship between pain and death allows pain to manifest itself as a signifier, however ephemeral, of the traumatic Real that exists beyond representation:

No particular form of torture is required to make visible the kinship between pain and death, both of which are radical and absolute, found only at the boundaries they themselves create. That pain is so frequently used as a symbolic substitute for death in the initiation rites of many tribes is surely attributable to an intuitive human recognition that pain is the equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeeleable in death. Each only happens because of the body. In each, the contents of consciousness are destroyed. The two are the most intense forms of negation, the purest expressions of the anti-human, of annihilation, of total aversiveness, though one is absence and the other a felt presence, one occurring in the cessation of sentience, the other expressing itself in grotesque overload. Regardless, then, of the context in which it occurs, physical pain always mimes death and the infliction of physical pain is always a mock execution. (31)

By continually exploring the gap between experience and representation, a gap located at the boundary of the self, Steffler aims to intensify the experience of pain, sadness, and physical aversion. His poetry gestures toward the “grotesque overload” of physical pain as a form of negation. While not capable of causing physical pain, the physical aversion created by poetically probing the trauma of the Real is Steffler’s anti-human gesture. Paradoxically, it is also aimed at signifying the ontological certainty caused by pain that Scarry describes. The chaos of the wilderness, along with the physical discomfort it causes, thus becomes a signifier of a fundamental being that cannot be symbolically represented, but that exists in the experience of pain the poem describes and, in some cases, inflicts. For Steffler, this position of discomfort and loss is as at home as one can get in the wild (or in general). Choosing the wilderness as the locus of pain-as-ontology deflates the romantic binary distinction

between urban and wild that positions the wild as a regenerative space. It may put the individual in closer proximity to fundamental being, but that being is nevertheless simultaneously compromised and reinforced by its relationship with somatic pain.

Steffler further explores the relationship between being, ecology, and pain as the collection progresses. While the third section “Borrowed Home” adds a geographic trope to the search for home within the natural world, it is in the final section, “Animal,” that the speaker begins to come to terms with his rootlessness. In this section, Steffler uses the trope of the animal to signify an inherently wild, predatory, and undomesticated vision of the relationship between self, environment, and aesthetic representation. In “The Green Insect,” for example, he disavows the desire to write scenery rather than the proprioceptive scene as he lays a green insect down on a clean page:

I laid it gently down on a clean page, but it wanted no convalescence,
it ripped up reality, it flung away time and space,

I couldn't believe the strength it had,
it unwound its history, ran out its spring in kicks and
rage, denied itself, denied me and my ownership,
fizzed, shrank, took off in wave after wave of murder,
and left nothing but this page faintly stained with
green. (82)

The attempt to contain the insect in language is met with a violent response, implying the impossibility of adequately representing the ecological linguistically. Instead, the insect plays its own anarchic role in the representation, refusing to submit to a static, human-centred vision of ecological identity. It rages, denying the human subject ownership. Its destruction of the page evokes Steffler's compost aesthetic, as the singular aesthetic object, the clean page, is both physically broken and unwound from history. The “wave after wave of murder” enacted by the insect resembles the implicit murder of symbolic representation, evoked earlier in the collection in the figure of the moose print. The green insect, therefore, enacts a struggle of presence against the absence of symbolic representation. As such, it stands as a signifier of the struggle of Steffler's lyric voice in the collection, which undergoes the same battle between the desire to describe the ecological and the desire to relin-

quish the logic of domination implicit in such forms of representation. Like the insect, Steffler's speaker is unwilling to submit to conventional constructs of ecological identity. Instead, as in earlier poems such as "Cedar Cove," that identity is one that is both in flux and determined by the painful relationship between the subject and the gap at the core of ecological representation. It is, therefore, significant that the insect in the poem must unwind its history, deny its identity, and commit "wave after wave of murder" before it is finally able to leave the page, now "faintly stained with green." The green stain, however faint, that the insect leaves behind suggests that its identity is constructed at moments of violence, struggle, and contestation, just as the speaker in the collection determines his own ontological position to be one inextricably linked to somatic suffering.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that the collection's final and titular poem, "That Night We Were Ravenous," lapses into a long Whitmanian catalogue which, through the use of simile, positions nature as at once random, menacing, and beautiful. Detailing a highway encounter with a moose, an all-too familiar scenario on Newfoundland roads, the speaker imagines how the animal "had burst from the zoo of our dreams"; how "[n]o man had touched her or given her movements geometry"; how "she was our deaths come briefly forward to say hello" (116-17). While Steffler's use of simile foregrounds the impossibility of fully representing the experience, the encounter with an anarchic wilderness as a "high-explosive bomb loaded with bones and meat" puts the speaker in touch with an atavistic, if unrepresentable, wilderness ethos. In this encounter, the trope of hunting for identity in the wilderness that extends over the course of the collection comes to fruition in the final acceptance that it is precisely the randomness of the encounter, the dream of the hunt for a singular, if incommensurable, ontology that, paradoxically, defines the experience of the wild. In the final lines, Steffler writes,

That night we were ravenous. We talked, gulping waving our
forks. We entered one another like animals entering the woods.

That night we slept deeper than ever.

Our dreams bounded after her like excited hounds. (118)

In these words, the speaker and his partner become animals, acting upon instinct. As such, they are no longer bound by the ideologically constructed concepts of nature that the speaker has sought to overcome since the book's first section. The word "ravenous" implies a continued insatiable hunger, both for food and for sex, one that is instinctive and animalistic. However, once this animal state is achieved, the speaker and his partner, fresh from the trauma and pain of a near-death experience, are finally able to sleep. As Scarry suggests, such moments of trauma "make visible the kinship between pain and death, both of which are radical and absolute" (31). Significantly, it is this brief encounter with the absolute ontology evoked by the trauma of the event that allows the couple to find a brief sense of peace as they fall asleep. However, even in sleep, they continue to hunt for a singular experience, as they bound after the image of the moose (finally visible now, no longer in the shape of its absent prints, but still not present).

For Steffler, this animal connection marks a kinetic vision of the wild, one that remains attentive to its anarchic elements. As such, Steffler uses poetry to challenge tropes of domination that position the ecological as a space of redemption and harmony or as a mirror of the human world. Instead, his composting aesthetic welcomes the effacement of selfhood implicit in encounters with the Atlantic Canadian wilderness. Indeed, his aesthetic determines that it is in this moment of violence that the self's ontological position, however fractured by the wreckage of personal history and psychological history, can be located.

WORKS CITED

- Berry, Wendell. *Recollected Essays, 1965-1980*. San Francisco: North Point, 1981. Print.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. Print.
- . *The Work of Fire*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Poet." *Essays: Second Series*. Boston, 1844. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Texts*. Web. 1 Aug. 2013.
- Kerridge, Richard. Introduction. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. Ed. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells. London: Zed, 1998. 1-10. Print.
- Mathews, Freya. "Deep Ecology." *Environmental Philosophy: Critical Concepts in the Environment*. Ed. J. Baird Callicott and Clare Palmer. London: Routledge, 2004. 217-32. Print.
- Olson, Charles. "Projective Verse." *The New American Poetry*. Ed. Donald Allen. Berkeley: U of California P, 1960. 386-96. Print.

- Rasula, Jed. *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002. Print.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.
- Schwenger, Peter. *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. Print.
- Steffler, John. *That Night We Were Ravenous*. Toronto: McClelland, 1998. Print.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Living in the End Times*. New York: Verso, 2010. Print.
- . “O Earth, Pale Mother!” *In These Times* 34.7 (2010): 15. Web. 7 Aug. 2013.
- . “Wake Up and Smell the Apocalypse.” *New Scientist* 27.75 (2010): n. pag. Web. 7 Aug. 2013.