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Are trees forms? On formalism, material feminism, and historical literature

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ABSTRACT

This essay draws on formalist cultural studies and material feminism to argue for a new approach in modernist studies, which I call formalist materialism, that reads ecological forms alongside aesthetic forms. Such an approach may have distinct advantages. As a theoretical model working from these traditions, it illuminates a new direction for formalist attention to literature by connecting it to embodiment, ecology, and material substances, and a novel path for feminist materialists by suggesting historical objects and situations where human and nonhuman agencies might be clearer. As I demonstrate in readings of Karel Čapek and Virginia Woolf, this model of reading also might help reinvigorate ways of approaching early-twentieth-century modernism in our time of ecological crisis, but without looking for signs of our concerns and epistemologies in the past.

KEYWORDS

Ecocriticism; modernist studies; formalism; material feminism; Čapek; Karel (1890–1938); Woolf; Virginia (1882–1941)

Questions of form

If we have made it over the thorny hedge that asks whether formalisms can be historical (maybe it is a big *if*), we might be ready to ask better questions about how aesthetic forms fuse with, and help shape, historically-situated knowledge and experiences of all kinds.¹ Exciting recent criticism of just the past decade sees the world outside the aesthetic not as formalisms' others, but as densely imbricated and co-creational. Social, political, economic, and historical forms – companies, industries, governmental agencies, social clubs, informal networks, and more – have lately been considered alongside aesthetic forms for clearer views of how social and aesthetic formal elements work together to ~~organize, arrange, and constrain~~ forces, energies, and power. An early-twenty-first-century formalist is not so likely to ask whether “my work [...] advance[s] formalism over historicism [...] but whether or not it is possible *not* to be formalist” (Berlant 265; italics in original). Thus Caroline Levine asks “what does each form afford, and what happens when forms meet?” (16). Thus Anna Kornbluh asks how careful readers of aesthetic forms might learn how “to understand and even engineer parallel formations in the phenomenal realm of everyday life, in everyday spaces in everyday institutions, as these too emerge in the medium of language” (5). Of course, attention to form has a long history in modernist studies – old, new, and global. Readers have long known that forms absorb, abut, counter, mingle with, or resist the energies of modernities.² Perhaps further, latent possibilities

persist yet in modern forms. In a recent assessment of global modernisms, Jahan Ramazani argues that attention to the interactions between aesthetic forms and historical modernities may help us formulate new questions – not only about texts and their contexts but also about what kinds of aesthetic, social, and political knowledge we are reading for in the first place.³

Valuable as formalist cultural studies is for readings of modernism, however, it has yet to offer a way into questions about one of modernity's most unforgiving legacies. How do we read aesthetic forms against the larger, brutal pictures of ecological crisis and environmental injustice? Are aesthetic forms joined as tightly to the ecological as they are to social, political, and economic spheres? If so, how do we trace those ties, and what new varieties of knowledge might they afford? If not, is literary studies worthwhile against the terrifying specter of a warming world? To be sure, readers across literary and cultural studies have been engaged in questions like these for some time, though what they center depends largely on the period from which they read. Readers of historical literature often prefer to focus on aesthetic forms as providing insights into and models for (re)thinking lived experiences and embodied knowledge.⁴ By contrast, critics of contemporary culture and aesthetics are more likely to do the reverse, carefully tracking material connections between bodies, natures, toxins, and other physical substances with less attention to the formal properties for imaginative literature. Both approaches are valuable but seem incompatible. This creates a problem to readers of modernism, an area of study whose disputed time frame goes at least as far back as World War I and terminates either vicinal to or within the contemporary.

Models of reading inform the placement of these boundaries, and ecocriticism most often approaches modernism as a movement of the past. In that regard, some of the broad themes in this scholarship treat modernist forms as: valuable cultural artifacts that emerge as part of the rise of petroculture and increasing ecological degradation (Raine; Schuster); tracking with the systemic violence and injustices of imperialism, global capitalism, and world-systems (Davis; Hegg Lund; Howell; Wientzen); and as providing models for rethinking binaries that structure conceptions of the ecological, like modernity/nature, everyday time/geological time, or human/nonhuman (Cantrell; Laity; Raine; Scott; Taylor), which in turn lay the groundwork for ecocriticism itself, including new materialisms (McCarthy; Sultzbach).⁵ One other commonality of note: critiques of global capitalism (Davis; Wientzen) and ecofeminist readings (Cantrell; Laity; Scott) are most often those that shuttle between grand narratives – Anthropocene, capitalism, empire, patriarchy – and the more granular, material realities of individual bodies and lived experiences. This is vital. How to bridge the gap between the immense scales of the geological, planetary, and nonhuman to the everyday, embodied, and affective remains one of the most difficult questions in ecological critique.

For these reasons, it would be valuable to modernist studies to consider more often material unities as very much like aesthetic forms. Doing so would allow for a richer understanding of the complex material effects aesthetic forms have in shaping the cultures, economies, and flows of power from which they emerge or enter into, and would also allow new kinds of opportunities for discovering how nonhuman agencies operate and manifest themselves. What would this approach look like? What would happen if we asked formalist questions about ecological objects – as different as trees or coal – and how they interact with cultural artifacts? What if we extended and refined Carol Cantrell's

reading of modernist forms as “join[ing] the issue of backgrounding with the issue of affordances, with the sense of being hailed by something, and the combination of otherness and continuity between lives this connection implies” (32)? Questions like these would need to complicate the formalist distinction between made vs. found objects with a materialist vocabulary of human vs. nonhuman agency and its implied commitment to recognizing the co-creational capacity of ecological objects at the discursive level, the material level, and all stops in between.⁶

Such an approach, which I will call formalist materialism, would not require ignoring the differences between trees and toxins, water and weather, and would not need to anthropomorphize objects (like Aldo Leopold’s trees as witnesses to human history [6–18]) or be bogged down in the object-oriented-ontological mire of exploring the ontologies of nonhuman matter and objects. Rather, it would think about ecological objects in the way Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reads stone – not sculpted or “symbol-laden” rock, but unworked “stone as an active partner in the shaping of worlds” (14) enchanting imaginations, figures of speech, and providing the foundation for stories about ourselves and the worlds we imagine. To regard ecological forms in this way could fill an epistemological gap by providing a more rigorous method for attending to the multiple, sometimes conflicting agencies and decentralized flows of power that shape human and nonhuman interactions. More may be at stake here, then, than literary theory. Discovering intersections between material and aesthetic, physical and imagined, world and text, also means finding new ways of imagining a future that other modes – resignation, apocalyptic fascination, melancholic drift, or postures of critically distancing oneself from extinction – tend to foreclose. As we will see, affect figures importantly in formalist materialism as well.

In a moment, I will turn to two global modernist contemporaries, Karel Čapek and Virginia Woolf, to put these ideas into practice. Working with authors who differ in gender, sexuality, nationality, and language will help illuminate how their similar aesthetic forms interact with some of the same ecological forms to channel historically-situated knowledge, power, and materials. I will read these two with particular regard to gender, a category modernism has explored as a defining feature of embodied experience – as a form of identification that lends coherence to stories of collectives and a biological form that is also an aesthetic-form-bending theme. First, though, let me finish limning this theoretical framework by introducing two thinkers who will help guide my exploration: Anahid Nersessian, who blends marxism, environmental humanism, and affect studies in a compelling formalist argument, and Stacy Alaimo, a pioneer of materialist feminism’s second wave.⁷

Nersessian’s contribution to formalist inquiries will be helpful here in part because, like many in modernist studies, she is a reader of both historical and contemporary aesthetics. Wary of collapsing literary periods into an ultralong geological span, Nersessian reads Romantic poetry against contemporary film because their shared formal features highlight pivotal disparities in how these historical moments imagine the effects past and present acts will have on the future. Her hermeneutic labors to identify what experiences and epistemological modes literary forms capture and encode while, at the same time, guarding against projecting present-day ecological awareness and anxieties onto earlier texts and their authors.⁸ Forms here do not mirror, represent, or mediate: rather, they “adjust,” adapting inherited aesthetic techniques “to bring experience close to its representation in language” (313). Put differently, the forms that concern Nersessian are fossils that

have captured information and affects as they were being processed, not packages containing tidy, already-well-understood ideas and feelings. As such, she is as interested in nescience around ecological matters as much as knowledge about them. Following the messy shapes and jagged edges of inchoate ecological awareness in this way means reading what she calls calamity form, “a poetic technique that shapes the uncertain experience of anticipating, living through, and remembering ecological catastrophe” (311). Reading calamity form might mean encountering expressions that appear prescient in hindsight, but might also mean reading texts that do not conform with present conceptions of reality. In affective terms, calamity form begins as the “profoundly anxiogenic” possibility that a disastrously changed climate may be unavoidable, but persists as a push to “consider how literature [...] provides alternatives to the wholesale voiding of imaginative possibilities for future worlds;” likewise, the nescience calamity form represents “does not mark the end of optative thinking but rather is a provocation to it” (324). As we will see, recognizing the ecological nescience of early-twentieth-century writers helps reveal both continuities and important disparities between their world and ours.

Along with Nersessian’s calamity form, I want to draw on Alaimo’s material feminism to create a fuller understanding of how ecological forms might work in connection with aesthetic ones. Like others doing similar work, Alaimo is especially interested in the effects of, and actions involved within, powerful entities preying upon the vulnerable and historically marginalized. She is often startlingly incisive. Building on deconstruction and theories of representation without rehearsing their well-trod lessons, Alaimo’s material feminism “undertake[s] the transformation of gendered dualisms – nature/culture, body/mind, object/subject, resource/agency, and others – that have been cultivated to denigrate and silence certain groups of humans as well as nonhuman life” (*Bodily* 5). Alaimo does not simply destabilize these binaries but looks across them, a critical gesture that “entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected agencies” (17). Trans-corporeality, the name of this tracing of varied agencies and material connections across a spectrum of being, returns often to human and social concerns while refusing to privilege the human over other agencies. As we will see in the turn to modernist texts and contexts below, reading trans-corporeality reveals otherwise occluded effects of long-term human interactions with other bodies, both human and nonhuman – ecological forms – and the injustices that sometimes result from these.

Walks in the park

In the summer of 1924, the Czech writer Karel Čapek visited the United Kingdom for eight weeks at the invitation of the London-based International P. E. N. Club. The trip presented perfect material for the life-long Anglophile, and Čapek set to writing immediately. His accounts of England, Scotland, and Ireland were serialized bi-weekly in Prague’s *Lidové noviny*, and almost immediately translated and re-serialized in *The Manchester Guardian*. Perhaps because of Čapek’s satire, which pressed with a gently chiding rather than a caustic edge, English audiences delighted in his sketches of life right away. *Letters from England* (1925), the travelogue that collected his columns, was published in Britain the following year, where it ran through eight printings before the end of the decade (Klíma 125).

One of Čapek's first "letters" muses over the charms of great English parks. The entry focuses on what Čapek perceives as the merging of the parks' landscape with English politics, a connection especially keen in the parks' trees. "[T]hese trees have had a great influence on Toryism in England. I think they preserve the aristocratic instincts, the historical sense, Conservatism, tariffs, golf, the House of Lords, and other odd and antique things" (322). The same trees frame the grassy lawns where Čapek finds a site of nature-culture strongly redolent of fairy worlds and unbridled freedom. Pausing at Hampton Court, Čapek mixes marvel with mock-surprise as he describes the sight of a well-dressed man breaking from the path to cross the turf.

I expected him to ride into Kingston on a stag or to begin dancing, or a gardener to come up and give him a good scolding. But nothing happened, and at last even I dared to make my way straight across the grass to an old oak. And nothing happened! Never have I had a feeling of such unrestricted liberty. It's very curious; here, evidently, man is not regarded as a[n] obnoxious animal. Here, they don't subscribe to the dismal myth that grass won't grow beneath our hooves. Here, man has the right to walk across the meadow as if he were a wood-nymph or a property owner. I think that this has had a considerable influence upon his character and view of the world. It opens up the marvelous possibility of walking elsewhere than along a road, without regarding oneself as a beast of prey, a highwayman, or an anarchist. (323)

Here, the politics of parks and trees most readily align with the right: the protected leisure of the ruling class, Toryism, and imperial adventure (the walkable park's "considerable influence upon [the Englishman's] character" is, after all, "the marvelous possibility of walking elsewhere" as an explorer rather than aggressor). This translation, amended only somewhat from the original *Manchester Guardian* translation, also helps indicate that Čapek is partly lampooning a modernist aesthetics as rearguard as its politics.⁹ For here, trees have done their part to contribute to "the historical sense," T. S. Eliot's term for both the aesthetic *sine qua non* Eliot notoriously recommends (male) poets cultivate as well as the primary criterion for evaluating poetry.¹⁰ Yet, even as Čapek employs an ironic tourist's gaze, that blunted irony does not undercut genuine admiration for the personal freedoms – those "marvelous possibilit[ies]" – that this scene presents to him and other beneficiaries of the cultural dimensions of a masculine tradition and historical sense. What starts as gently ribbing English conservative politics and aesthetics winds up warmly embracing a broader rightwing politics of gender.

For at least these reasons, then, it is difficult not to read Čapek's account today as flipping the more famous experience Virginia Woolf would describe only a few years later, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Though one of modernism's most achingly familiar moments, the scene is worth revisiting here to recall how Woolf constructs her persona's account of crossing a few steps onto an Oxbridge lawn only to be disciplined immediately for her unplanned defiance of a centuries' old code of conduct. Lost in thought, she does not immediately connect the erratic, flapping "object" before her with her own walk.

Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand that the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation. Instinct rather than reason came to my help; he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me. Such thoughts were the work of a moment. As I regained the path the arms of the Beadle sank, his face assumed its usual repose, and though

turf is better walking than gravel, no very great harm was done. The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college might happen to be was that in protection of their turf, which has been rolled for 300 years in succession, they had sent my little fish into hiding. (6)

230 Like Čapek, Woolf sees her brief moment as resonating within a much longer sweep, gesturing to the deep history of gender's entanglements with the economic and the social. But where Čapek marvels at English parks' readiness to stage sites where "man has the right to walk across the meadow as if he were [...] a property owner" ("English" 323), Woolf's nod to the "300 years in succession" of land stewardship for the sake of exclusively male scholars highlights her wicked litotes – "no very great harm was done." The reversed gender politics are all too obvious and made so in part by how each characterizes their scene as either culturally inflected or ahistorical. Mary Beeton is not only interpolated precisely in order that she might feel the foreclosure of privilege and possibility; the Beadle's furiously "gesticulating" body – at first more "object" than fellow body – also closes in and takes up virtually all visual space, saving room only, it seems, for the ground beneath their feet ("This was the turf; there was the path"). By contrast, Čapek's park encounter conjures expansive visions of other ideal English "meadow[s]" beyond the immediate that are likewise open to the stately bodies of men (for "here, evidently, man is not regarded as a[n] obnoxious animal"). For Woolf, the grassy lawn serves as reminders of patriarchal norms; for Čapek, an off-the-path walk in the park is nothing less than a celebration of patriarchy as the guarantor of male liberty and leisure.

Moreover, because gender suffuses these moments so fully, these scenes from Čapek and Woolf also remind us that gender differences are much larger than even social or political collectives. They point to the often overlooked fact that many experiences beyond the human, beyond even the mammalian, are gendered. Considering this wider context also recalls the feminist biologist Myra J. Hird's revelation that, in a world where a genus of fungi has "more than 28,000 sexes," gender's shaping force is hardly binary (qtd. in Alaimo *Bodily* 6). Gender in all its multiplicity structures the material realities of flora as well as fauna, after all, which means that from their low grasses to their towering trees, the theaters of these scenes were themselves presenting genders long before the arrivals of Čapek's tourist and Woolf's scholar. We scarcely have an understanding, let alone the vocabulary, for how gendered forms of bodies contribute to the agencies and everyday experiences of humans and nonhumans in the early twentieth century.

Yet they have been imagined. In Čapek, the trees that situate the park as a natural space also are storehouses of patriarchal ideologies. The informality of the travel narrative allows Čapek to pass off the hermeneutics undergirding such a statement – reading all the trees stippling England's great parks as working toward the protection of one gender's privileged status – as the casual observations ("It's very curious [...]") [323]) of an outsider to Britain who, thanks to this moment's conflicting hierarchies of power, is also an insider in its patriarchal structure ("here, evidently, man is not regarded as a[n] obnoxious animal" [323]). The effort of that interpretive labor becomes clearest when set against the outsider-perspective of Woolf's observer watching the wild "gesticulations of [this] curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt," the beadle who seeks, impossibly, to reconstruct the boundaries he means to police. The formal symmetry of these narratives invites us to reimagine how ecological forms – trees, bounded lawns, gendered bodies – reflect, support, inhibit, or act in contested combinations of all three on

social structures and power dynamics. They offer the opportunity to probe modernism's techniques for revealing nature's forms as participating in longer cultural and aesthetic traditions in which varieties of natural forms have had deeper impacts on texts, and the cultural and individual imaginations that co-produced them, than readers have typically noticed.

Woolf and Čapek both present scenes about the management of gendered authority in 1920s Britain that interlace social and ecological forms, and this seems striking enough to wonder how common such moments are. How often do modernist texts converge social power structures with ecological forms like bodies, bounded environments, or waterways? Lots. Some have received quite a bit of attention, like Marlow's tree-enshrouded steamboat journey in *Heart of Darkness* (1900),¹¹ or the pastoral's organization of bodies and ecological imaginations in *Howards End* (1910), *A Passage to India* (1924) and *Maurice* (1971).¹² Other memorable moments have nonetheless so far received less ecocritical attention: Bahka's outdoor wanderings in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935); the recurring apple tree(s) of H. D.'s *Trilogy* (1944–46); the enigmatic swirling of the Nile around Tayeb Salih's unnamed narrator at the conclusion of *Season of Migration to the North* (1966). It is not that these scenes have not been discussed, or that their relevance to ecocriticism has gone overlooked. Rather, the redescription and testing of socio-political power structures in each, where gender so often plays a prevalent role in spaces moderns typically would have recognized as the boundaries, or "outside," of culture – all of these scenes share a recipe that creates opportunities for reading modernist aesthetic forms alongside the social and ecological forms they organize. To do so in a more focused way, as the following section will by building on nescience as Nersessian describes it and borrowing from Alaimo's material feminism, may well generate an altered sense of the modernist past and our inherited present.

Trans-corporeality and nescience in modernisms

In "At the Crossroads of Europe" (1938), a late essay written just before the Nazi invasion of the Czech Republic, Čapek reimagines his homeland as created by all "the tectonic or climatic forces that gave rise to the soil of Europe," and in so doing becomes one of the earliest figures to claim human activity to be one of "the geological forces" acting on the Earth itself (399).¹³ The heart of Europe, where his country sits, is special because

all the geological periods joined in forming it, all the upheavals of the earth's crust that worked at the birth of Europe met within the frontiers of this small land. [...] This is the heart of Europe from the viewpoint of climate and nature [...] Still more expressive, however, though more modest and monotonous to the eye, is the last of the geological forces—a thousand years of human toil modeled this land. (399)

Čapek's characterization is both prophetic and not exactly on point – a kind of sensing without diagnosing an Anthropocene (though Čapek would probably have been more partial to calling it the Capitalocene). These lines appear near the beginning of Čapek's essay. They are not the culmination of an argument about the consequential, if unintentional, scope of anthropogenic change, but the set-up to a plea for maintaining a sovereign and democratic Czech Republic. So much of Čapek's fiction and drama firmly names international capitalism as the culprit of social turmoil and ecological damage, but here he will fail to make that connection, opting instead to plea for readers to appreciate and

fight to preserve the achievements in Czech cultural history. A strobe coup d'œil, this breathtaking ecological insight flashes from a cloud of political chaos, only to dissolve back into the darkness of the late 1930s.

As we have seen, thinking that is caught between knowing and unknowing, “[b]etween fact and hypothesis,” Nersessian urges us to call nescience (315). Nescience of this sort is a grasping at what a writer might have felt that is contemporaneous to literary production but not known, often because the knowledge itself is not yet available. Approaching an aesthetic movement for what it “does not know about its history as well as what it does know” (325), as Nersessian approaches Romanticism, may open a new set of formal questions, beginning with this paraphrase of Nersessian: what might happen if the new modernist studies concentrated more purposefully on what modernism *does not know* about modernity, about its historical moment, as well as what it does know? Čapek could not have been aware that he was living through what would later be described as a geological period defined by human change, but it is tempting to read him as a vatic figure auguring ecological crisis nonetheless. His internationally successful career owed to his sci-fi dystopian plots that continue to serve as object lessons for capitalist expansion. It was not uncommon for Čapek to kill off the human species entirely, or else leave its existence in great peril, after humans unleash a new and poorly understood technology in the service of capitalism. Shaking off that temptation, though, and reading Čapek’s productive nescience instead, this late essay appears to show “the earth’s crust” to be an ecological form not unlike an aesthetic form. It has been shaped partly by human actors, albeit without human intention of doing so, and like all signs, actions, and creations, its effects are polyvalent and complex.

Acknowledging the implications of this nescience would be a first step in a formalist-materialist reading of Čapek, which might then proceed by looking to imaginative forms that interact with the material realities that led Čapek to the regard capitalists as geological actors. Perhaps the best place to trace such connections is *The Makropulos Secret* (1922), Čapek’s drama in which gender and fossil fuel extraction prominently figure.¹⁴ *The Makropulos Secret* begins just as a century-old legal case deciding the rights to an estate bearing coal deposits is finally coming to an end. Emilia Marty, at first on the margins of the story and apparently an old friend of a deceased plaintiff, enters the plaintiff’s law firm to request access to private papers on the property that are immaterial to the case. She initially attracts little interest with the attorneys, apart from her curiously intimate knowledge of estate’s manor house, until they notice that her signature looks like a forgery of a deceased plaintiff, Ellian MacGregor. The lawyers soon discover Emilia Marty has not only gone by the name Ellian MacGregor but has had several aliases using the same initials. Her true identity is revealed to be Elina Makropulos, a woman born in 1585, and Emilia/Ellian/Elina’s interest is in gaining access to private papers which contain an occult recipe for renewing eternal life. The property-rights plot that appears to hover in the background remains impactful as it will decide who has access both to the papers and to a coal mine opened on the property in 1860 whose value in the play’s present day “can be reckoned at approximately, let’s say, 150 million” (120).

The plot of *The Makropulos Secret* revolves around a modernity characterized by a clash between occult practices, bureaucratic institutions, and the arbitrary manner in which legal rights are awarded. In this way, the play mediates the social changes spurred by the economic boom following the discovery of coal deposits in second half of the

nineteenth century throughout Bohemia, the region of the Czech Republic where Čapek himself was born in 1890. Bohemian coal was the most affordable fuel for heating households at the turn of the century, and became even more profitable as it was sold to meet the high demands for fuel in Bohemia's sugar industry and Germany's metallurgy industry. In short, coal became the central player in the rise of industrial modernity in the region. Property on which anthracite and lignite coals could be extracted raised property values to historic levels and transformed local economies and social structures into dichotomies of mine-owners and miners, haves and have-nots. The upheaval created by the coal industry in the span of a generation laid the foundation for the intense class unrest in the Czech Republic during the 1920s and 1930s, key decades in Čapek's career. By the late twentieth century, the "social pathologies" of class difference, as the residents of one Czech city dubbed them (qtd. in Pavlínek and Pickles 90), were complemented by a spike in diagnoses of a host of ill health effects related to persistent contact with coal, ranging from respiratory infections to bone disorders.¹⁵

The environmental injustice at the heart of these historical situations is no small matter. What Čapek knew of them is important, but so is what we are left to make of the forms that adjust themselves to the material realities fomenting around Čapek – issues not spotlighted in his drama but which swirl and swarm in its background. A formalist-materialist reader of *The Makropulos Secret* might seek to explore the complexities of Čapek's form and discourses that mediate such turbulent circumstances in Bohemia/Czech Republic in a play – the only form of literature that makes use of bodies and other materials – that Čapek characterized as a comedy. What kinds of pleasures are available to these characters, all of whom are transformed by the Loukov estate and its coal reserves though none of them will work in its pits? What were productions of the play like? Who attended performances, and what kinds of reactions did it provoke? Čapek could not have known the increased social unrest and environmental damage that would bubble over after his death, though he may have glimpsed them. They act as other instances of nescience and join his naming of the human as geological in 1938.

One further dimension of this nescience is its ability to add depth and specificity to the cultural history of the Anthropocene. In Čapek, the human-as-geological-force is not only rooted in capitalism, as is well established, but strongly connected to nationalist enterprises as well. Yet, while nationalism is often a masculine project, the nation for which Čapek advocates in his essay and throughout his career, the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938), had a complex but largely progressive relationship to gender. Women of the First Czech Republic were better educated than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, comprised a third of the nation's workforce (which helped create labor protections as durable as those enjoyed by men), and were enfranchised as early as 1910. Yet many Czech women were suspicious of feminism as a western European imposition on local customs, including religious and spiritual practices, to which women's social roles were closely linked.¹⁶ Elina Makropulos is a figure from the Bohemian occult whose female body – ostensibly young but actually centuries old – presents as part of the modern era while providing material connections to the deep historical roots of Bohemia's occult tradition. Her powerful influence on other characters becomes apparent near the end of the play when the lead attorney for the plaintiff, in an effort to sift out the truth of her identity, arranges for her to be questioned first in a kind of pseudo-courtroom setting and then, when that fails, in a mysterious mystic ritual. Ultimately, centering on a female character,

which was unusual for Čapek, in a play that considers the modern nation-state against its early modern history destabilizes hierarchies of power, complicating Čapek's typical themes – capital, governmental acquiescence to corporations, and ecological fallout – by foregrounding concerns connected to women, such as the place of traditional spiritual practices in modern life.

Here, Alaimo's trans-corporeality may help us better understand how different kinds of humans and communities vary in their engagement with, and impact on, wider environments, as well as how socio-political power uses nature not just ideologically but materially in efforts to marginalize minority groups. Reading historically in this way tempts presentism, but a work that presents the past as a text to be read by its characters in the present, like *The Makropulos Secret*, or like Woolf's thematically similar *Orlando* (1928), may be instructive for a formalist-material investigation of texts that encode human-nonhuman encounters which they may not fully grasp. For example: just after she wakes as a woman for the first time, Orlando looks out from a Turkish hilltop onto a nearly featureless rockface where a "shadow" lengthens before her, giving way to what resembles another English park.

As she looked, the hollow deepened and widened, and a great park-like space opened into the flank of the hill. Within, she could see an undulating and grassy lawn; she could see oak trees dotted here and there; she could see thrushes hopping among the branches. [...] Now she saw heavy carts coming along the roads, laden with tree trunks, which they were taking, she knew, to be sawn for firewood[.] (111)

As the vision diminishes, leaving Orlando determined to "sail for England the very next day" (112), Woolf anchors the scene in a longing for a natural space that signifies in a number of different, sometimes contrary affiliations. As a vision of Orlando's noble estate, the verdant scene offers villagers who rent land on that property space for their own homes and gardens, as well as communal resources like firewood. In this way, Orlando's estate serves the familiar trope of the English country house as nation-in-microcosm and locus for Orlando's nostalgia. Felling the trees for fuel also participates in a patriarchal logic of progress: working the land to lay claim to it. Revealing it to Orlando at almost the very moment that Orlando first comes to terms with newly-realized gender fluidity raises questions about how non-normative gendered bodies and experiences shape interactions with the ecological world, whether it is a hillside where sheep graze or an imagined "park-like space" stirring national sentiment.

A variety of approaches dedicated to embodied experience might explore issues raised here, including the passage's presentation of historical identities beyond cis-gender subjecthood; its development of complex, even fraught intersections of race, nationality, class, sexuality, and gender; its omission of Turkish voices; further elaborations on the imperial arrangements and world-systems that lead Orlando to be in Turkey at this time (and which also allowed Woolf to visit there in 1906); and how these issues are further complicated by the English "park-like" setting Orlando imagines in Bursa. However, formalist materialism would work through the ways that ecological forms like "oak trees," "grassy lawn[s]," and human bodies have helped shape the aesthetic form of this novel and its properties, and how novels have encouraged readers to interpret ecological forms. Even though this passage is entirely a protagonist's fantasy – the bodies here at one more diegetic remove – it nonetheless raises questions of ecological justice in

Woolf's invitation to twentieth-century readers to watch along with Orlando eighteenth-century tenant farmers working the land for firewood. The novel offers a schematic pre-history of Woolf's moment in which the working-class, the poor, and the destitute – many of whom descend from those historically excluded from land-ownership – were disproportionately impacted by practices like forest clearing for industrial use, and who lived lives diminished or cut short by the noxious coal smoke churned out of British factories (Mosley 97–103). Above all, this approach would seek not only to fashion better readers of Woolf's sinuous descriptions but also would seek affiliations with the social and ecological forms that imaginatively shape, and are shaped by, the world of her novel.

The formalist materialism for which I am advocating builds on Alaimo's trans-corporeality and Nersessian's formal approach to nescience because their combination offers critical pathways for exploring the inextricability of modernity's material and aesthetic dimensions. Trans-corporeal readings of global modernisms that retain Alaimo's vigilant attention to the interconnectedness of materials (including human bodies) stand to generate a richer sense of networks of capitalist expansion and exploitation by investigating not simply how human and nonhuman entities aggregate but how, at the scales of bodies and the everyday, human and nonhuman entities interlace with, crisscross, temporarily affiliate, impair, and/or damage one another. Scrutinizing how embodied experiences are already informed by what Alaimo calls "the strange agency of everyday things" (*Exposed* 188) would more precisely inform our sense of different phases, iterations and uneven developments of modernity. But here, too, Nersessian's formalism might offer one last reminder for studies of modernism: that it is not a liability for cultural forms to sidle up to their content rather than speaking directly about it. On the contrary, as climate science delivers more detail and complexity to the story of human impact on ecological systems, works of art are actually *more* useful than not for unknitting the cultural, aesthetic, affective, and economic building blocks that shape political discussions of climate change and how non-scientists imagine – and might reimagine – the continuities across the past and present, human and nonhuman, aesthetic and material forms. We live in our own nescience, but perhaps even that is useful, for nested inside the unknown is the small but vital space left for the possibility that things might be other than disastrous. Dipping into that space now and again, or perhaps more often, we can return to our communities to train ourselves and our students to become better readers of modernities as sites shot through with the ecological and the aesthetic alike.

Notes

1. We may be beyond it. Even if words like *form* and *formalism* continue to inspire knee-jerk accusations (anti-historical! apolitical!) into the future, critique seems to be losing interest in chasing around this circle. "Formalism," Anna Kornbluh brilliantly suggests, "should study how to compose and to direct – rather than ceaselessly oppose – form, formalization, and forms of sociability" (4). For other views of the formal as densely interwoven with the social and political, see Wolfson; Macpherson; Kramnick and Nersessian.
2. Rather than hope for even a modest footnoting of representative examples in this long tradition, let me point to one of the more inspiring statements of the "new" modernist studies: as modernist studies goes global, writes Susan Stanford Friedman,

I hope that we can be open to different kinds of aesthetic innovation linked to different modernities around the world and through time. In this regard, the aesthetic is always

imbricated in the political, the historical. And *vice versa*. Not a single set of formalist characteristics, but rather the formal *per se*, however it might articulate the modern. (488; italics in original)

3. “[A] kaleidoscopic range of local-foreign configurations,” writes Ramazani, can be found by readers attentive to “[t]he form of a poem,” which “is no less its figurative language, rhythm, tone, syntax, registers of diction, and so forth than it is its overall structure” (127, 122).
4. **Outside** of modernist studies, Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer make a compelling case for “ecological formalism” in reading **nineteenth**-century British literature.
5. A notable exception is Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy’s materialist reading of modernism against form, which sets its sights on “works that would include nature while simultaneously resisting the romantic and pastoral models inherited from the literary past” (18).
6. What characterizes a form *qua* form for Kornbluh is its “madness” (6), a sensibility that would seem to resonate with Levine and Ramazani. By contrast, Sandra Macpherson suggests trees may be forms when she playfully collapses the distinction between the organic beings and the linguistic diagramming tools. However, I am less compelled here by Macpherson’s “little formalism,” whose unapologetic preference to avoid historical situation (385) puts it at odds with what I am suggesting here.
7. Material feminism’s twin genealogy begins with marxist feminists like Michèle Barrett, Christine Delphy, and Rosemary Hennessy who brought feminist thought together with historical materialism. Alaimo works within a second generation for whom material feminism concerns “race, sexuality, imperialism and colonialism, and anthropocentrism” as well as class and gender (Landry and MacLean 229). The material feminism I am more concerned with here begins in the late 1990s with the work of thinkers like Alaimo, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen Barad who built upon poststructural analyses of embodiment and representation while also turning toward their attention away from discourses and toward material entities, especially in contexts of ecological emergency.
8. Nersessian cautions against readings that emerge out of the choice to “situate all writing about environmental disaster, whether natural, man-made, or both, within an Anthropocenic context,” for such reading “participates in a mode of preemptive inquiry whereby an explanatory structure regulates what can be seen and said about a textual artifact, historical event, or a physical world” (310).
9. Although Geoffrey Newsome’s more recent translation renders Čapek to say “historical precedent” (29), the original English translation by Paul Selver (the English novelist and contributor to *The New Age*, *McClure’s*, and *Coterie* magazines) seems at least in this instance truer to Čapek’s subtle but stubborn insistence that aesthetics and politics hold tight to public spaces where nature is preserved and sanctified, and particularly where preservation and sanctification are meant to ennoble national character.
10. In addition to advancing a poetics rooted in the male European canon, it is worth recalling that Eliot’s defense of “the historical sense” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) is anchored in a curiously disembodied approach to time. This is made clear partly by the metaphor that “the historical sense compels a man to write [...] with his own generation in his bones,” but also when he writes “the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence;” it “is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together” (38). I have not been able to ascertain whether or to what degree Čapek would have been familiar with Eliot’s essay, though it is clear they shared some aesthetic and political sympathies.
11. For ecocritical readings of *Heart of Darkness*, see Sultzbach (1–3; 9–12; 16–18); McCarthy (41–76); Taylor (171–4).
12. For ecocritical readings of Forster, see Howell; Sultzbach (25–81).
13. Though some contemporary historians of science are skeptical that antecedent theories of human agency on a planetary or geological scale capture the complexity of the Anthropocene (Hamilton and Grinevald), the **nineteenth**- and **twentieth**-century scientists who began theorizing human agency in this way include Eduard Suess, Antonio Stoppani, Vladimir

Vernadsky, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Edouard Le Roy; the American conservationist George Perkins Marsh also helped popularize Stoppani's concept of an "anthropozoic era" (Steffen et al). Čapek, who read widely, was quite possibly aware of these thinkers, but it is not clear that he was. Given his emphasis on industrial and international capitalism as the central driver for adverse planetary changes, Čapek is best read as a forerunner of a counter-narrative like the Capitalocene. In this way, he might be more readily compared with the ecological awareness of midcentury social theory (Weißpflug).

14. Another text to consider would be Čapek's *War with the Newts* (1936), which Timothy Wientzen has read in a different vein as beneficial for rethinking how the geological and the planetary appear in modernist studies.
15. This paragraph relies on Good (132–3) and Pavlínek and Pickles (92–3).
16. See Cravens (44–48) and Wolchik (527–31).

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