

Unsettling the American Landscape: Toward a
Phenomenological and Onto-Epistemological Paradigm of
Hope in Diana Bellessi's and Mary Oliver's Poetic Works

by

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ABSTRACT

The comparative study of the poetics of landscape of the Argentinian poet Diana Bellessi in *Sur* (1998) and the U.S. poet Mary Oliver in *What Do We Know* (2002) reveal how each writer acknowledges discourse and perception as means to bridge the nature/culture dichotomy and to unsettle the American landscape from cultural and epistemological assumptions that perpetuate the disconnection with matter. While Bellessi re-signifies the historical and cultural landscape drawn by European colonization in order to establish a dialogue with the voices of the past related to a present-day quest to reconnect with nature, Oliver articulates an ontological and phenomenological expression to reformulate prevailing notions of cognizing materiality aiming to overcome the culture/nature divide. I therefore examine the interrelationship between perception, language and nature in Bellessi's and Oliver's poetic works by deploying Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of perception into material feminist theoretical works by Karen Barad and Susan Hekman.

In so doing, I demonstrate how both poets act on language to forge a non-dualistic expression that, in allowing matter as an agentic force that relates with humans in dynamics of mutual impact and intra-activity, entails a phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach to ground language in materiality and produce ethical discursive practices to relate with nature. I argue that Bellessi's and Oliver's approach toward nature proves as necessary in the articulation of efforts leading to overcome the nature/culture dichotomy and thus, to address ecological and environmental concerns.

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Introduction

In this comparative study of the poetics of landscape of the Argentinian poet Diana Bellessi and the U.S. poet Mary Oliver, close readings of select poems from Bellessi's *Sur* (1998) and Oliver's *What Do We Know* (2002) reveal how each writer acknowledges discourse as a means to bridge the nature/culture dichotomy and to unsettle the American landscape from cultural and epistemological assumptions that maintain the disconnection with matter. Through a focused exploration of the interrelationship between perception, language and nature in Bellessi's and Oliver's poetry, I examine how both poets act on language by forging a non-dualistic expression that entails an ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological perspective to reconnect with the natural world. While Bellessi deploys language to *disclose* the erasure of cultural memory and nature from discourse, which was started by European colonization, Oliver brings matter back into discourse as a non-objectified and active agent. In doing so, the poets articulate an expression that grounds language into the sensible world by producing new meanings and ethical discursive practices to relate with nature.

I chose Bellessi's *Sur* and Oliver's *What do we know* because these texts best represent how the incorporation of perception as a means of cognition assists the construction of a phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach that contributes to overcome the division nature/culture through language and fosters further ethical discursive practices to address ecological and environmental

concerns. Understanding these poetic works in comparative perspective contributes not only to expand the linguistic, epistemological, and cultural borders of ecocritical research, but also to bridge literary traditions and world views regarding representations of landscape in the Americas. In addition, the comparative, inter-American perspective study of Bellessi's and Oliver's phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach might help realize the creation of innovative and interdisciplinary ways of reconnecting the human with the non-human. In this regard, the ethical, non-dualistic and potentially transformative discourse that Bellessi and Oliver each offer in their poetry opens up the possibility of connecting politics and literature in order to articulate inter-American pedagogical efforts aiming to raise ecological awareness and develop collaborative approaches to ecological and environmental issues.

The theoretical framework that I use to examine Bellessi's and Oliver's poetic works deploys Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of perception into material feminist theoretical works by Karen Barad and Susan Hekman. In so doing, I particularly draw from Merleau-Ponty's principle of *reversibility* and *voyance* and from Susan Hekman's notion of *disclosure*. Merleau-Ponty's theoretical contributions have lately proved to be of great importance for ecological and environmental philosophical research, for his perspective explores "those aspects of deep ecology that concern the intertwining and mutual well-being of life forms, questions about the meaning of being human, and the refusal of Nature solely in terms of its potential for human use" (Cataldi and Hamrick 5). I employ Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology because in

acknowledging perception as an active constituent in the knowledge production and materiality as pre-existent to thought enables an understanding of the co-constitutional relation between the human and non-human and their mutual impact.

Of the several terms that are crucial to my study, I would like to begin with *reversibility* and *voyance*. While a provisional definition of Merleau-Ponty's notion of *reversibility* implies a perceptual relation of reciprocal recognition between the perceiver and the perceived, *voyance* refers to the engagement of perception with the sensible in a relation of synesthetic analogy whereby matter somehow passes into the perceiver by allowing him/her to make visible the absent. On the other hand, Karen Barad is one of the feminist philosophers of science that has had the most influence on feminist science studies and material feminist criticism. Accordingly, I draw from her notions of "agential realism" and "intra-action," which recognize matter as an agentic force whose intra-actions with the human are bridged by discourse; such discourse in turn produces agential relations in reality that bring about material and political impacts. Susan Hekman's notion of *disclosure* thus synthesizes the best ideas of the onto-epistemological turn in feminist theory and science studies. These ideas refer to the agreement of materiality-oriented theoretical contributions on the dismantling of oppositions, the displacement of epistemology to ontology in Continental and Anglo-American philosophical debates, the acknowledgement of the influence of discourses in reality and the recognition of matter as an agentic force that *intra-acts* with the human. Thus *disclosure* in Hekman's view and in mine not only

embraces an onto-epistemological dimension to grasp materiality, but it also alludes to the practice of bringing to light aspects of reality from different perspectives in order to enable us to compare either the usefulness or the impact specific discursive practices have in materiality.

The following pages present, first, what general aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology seem to have had a strong impact, whether acknowledged or not, on material feminist criticism. This impact owes to how Merleau-Ponty's and material feminist's theories coincide in advocating for bridging the gap between science studies and socio-constructionist theories in order to build an interdisciplinary approach that reconceptualizes nature and the human in its inter and intra-relationships. I then examine how *reversibility* and *voyance* prove complementary to the new directions in critical theory that material feminist critics propose as these notions emphasize perception as a way to reconnect the human with the non-human and language as a means to bring this reconnection into discourse. Assembling Merleau-Ponty's theorizing and of material feminisms by way of Barad and Hekman should thus prove helpful to demonstrate how Bellessi and Oliver act on language to provide a phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach that aims to overcome the dichotomy between nature and culture and to unsettle the American landscape from discourses that have veiled cultural memory and the intra-action between discourse and reality. The deployment of these theoretical approaches in the analysis of Bellessi's and Oliver's poetics of landscape likewise leads to an understanding of a first necessary step towards transforming our relation to the

environment, that is, a recognition that our cognitive experience of the world occurs through embodied perception as well as by means of discursive apparatuses. Such phenomenological and onto-epistemological understanding of the world, in turn, discloses Bellessi's and Oliver's poetic discourse as ethical discursive practices from where to start imagining different ways to relate with matter and thus transcend the culture/nature dichotomy.

With relation to the problems of nature versus culture and the relations of humans towards the environment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception attempts to overcome the ontological and epistemological division between subject and object. His works propose recasting the Cartesian *cogito* and placing bodily perception as a constituent and active agent in the production of knowledge and language. Merleau-Ponty challenges Western rationalism as instituted by Descartes and continued in "intellectualist" and "empiricist" schools of thought, to assert that knowledge does not pre-exist the material world. Rather, as his *Phenomenology of Perception (PP)* posits "all knowledge takes place within the horizons opened up by perception" (207). Merleau-Ponty, for whom there are no cognitive principles prior to materiality, argues that phenomenological perception materializes through our *being* in the world. In his view, existence, the 'I am', is only possible if the certainty of existence rooted in the 'I think' is relocated in the phenomena. As he states "the primary truth is indeed 'I think', but only provided that we understand thereby 'I belong to myself' while belonging to the world" (*PP* 407). In seeking to demonstrate that mind does not antecede reality and, thus, that things do not exist inside us but

outside in a constant relationship whereby we affect them and are affected by them, Merleau-Ponty contends that the body is a sensible and sentient entity whose existence is realized in the intertwining with other sensible/sentient bodies that inhabit the world.

Merleau-Ponty's awareness of the dual nature of the body and the inadequacies of language to overcome binary thinking, leads him to argue that the body as 'sensed' and sentient is embodied by a "thickness of the flesh" that, at once, separates it from the other sensible/sentient bodies yet, at the same time, constitutes the body's visibility ("The Intertwining – The Chiasm" 169). The "thickness of flesh" becomes a means of communication between our *flesh* and the *flesh* of world. He states, "[t]he world seen is not 'in' my body, and my body is not 'in' the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it" (IC 169). *Flesh* as a philosophical metaphor not only implies a sort of interstitial space where the world's visibility meets and produces meanings, "the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance," but also involves the reversible nature of perception (IC 170). Merleau-Ponty ascribes great importance to a sensible inherence that we sentient beings share with the material world and, as such, his work stresses the mutual visibility and touching that takes place among corporeal agents in a return of perception upon itself that he calls the "reversibility of the seeing and the visible [and] of the touching and the touched" (IC 174). Such dynamics of *reversibility* where the visible body sees and is seen, touches and is touched by other bodies as

if they were completing a vital cycle in each other's existence represents an important characteristic of his notion of *flesh*. As Merleau-Ponty asserts:

There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching; there is a circle of the visible and the seeing, the seeing is not without visible existence; there is even an inscription of the touching in the visible, of the seeing in the tangible – and the converse; ... We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be the union of contradictories – but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being. (PP 172, 174)

Thus, from within this set of ideas about perception, *reversibility* as a relationship of co-constitution and correspondence that occurs between the human and non-human entails not only a reawakening of "... our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body," but also the mutual acknowledgement of the existence of other corporealities as active participants and constituents of the material world (PP 206). In all, by privileging perception as a site to examine intersubjectivity in connection to language, Merleau-Ponty's onto-epistemological perspective attempts to overcome the Cartesian idealism expressed in the relation between the sensible and the intelligible.

Useful as a gloss on Merleau-Ponty's works is the study conducted by the philosopher Kirk M. Besmer whose philosophical critique points out that

Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenological rationality" as well as his explorations of intersubjectivity and language begin in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to Besmer, such premises are later complemented with an inclusion of culture and history that guides his reflections to search for "the *logos* of the cultural world" rather than "the aesthetic *logos* of the world," as he did in his early thought (51, 67). In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty notes not only the interdependence of language and thought, but also that language is a contact zone between the subjective and the objective. For Merleau-Ponty "thought is not an 'internal' thing, and does not exist independently of the world and of words" (*PP* 183). Therefore, in trying to provide an account of language that demonstrates that thought is not conditioned to language, but rather, that thought is achieved through language, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes two types of expressions. Ordinary or empirical speech refers to language as a linguistic phenomenon, that is, as a system of structures that operate, in Besmer's words, at a "pre-conscious level" by producing meaning in relation to cultural context, gestural expression, and common usage, making communication possible. In ordinary speech "thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted, when our cultural store is put at the service of this unknown law, as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture in the formation of habit" (*PP* 183). On the other hand, 'transcendental' or 'authentic speech' alludes to the expression that produces new ideas and meanings, in Merleau-Ponty's view ideas that come to existence for the first time, which somehow exceed the meaning generated by ordinary language. Unlike 'ordinary speech' where speech might happen

independently of thought, ‘authentic speech’ or creative expression brings together language and thought.

In this regard, Besmer’s examination of the evolution of Merleau-Ponty’s thought regarding language leads him to argue that “authentic speech” or “novel expression,” as he calls it, represents the possibility “in which the speaking subject can *act* on language to modify it ...” as well as on those “... inherited linguistic structures because such modifications are based on experience that extends beyond the initial experience that instituted the structures themselves” (76). In other words, by disclosing new meanings not only language can be altered, but also linguistic structures since those linguistic alterations become a new experience that supersedes the experience where these structures lay on. For Merleau-Ponty language must cease to be the “strongholds of thought” and “...become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world ...” (PP 182). This presence is possible by an onto-epistemological language that not only prompts us to participate in the constitution of a less reductive knowledge that incorporates phenomenal reality, but that also offers the possibility of either to establish or to displace prevailing truths. Besmer posits that Merleau-Ponty’s account of language, in attempting to overcome Platonist and nominalist notions of language (language as “an accidental addition to the things themselves” or as historically conditioned) affirms that the return to the phenomenal world cannot be achieved “from *outside* of language but only *through* language” (78). Thus Besmer states that “each act of novel expression that succeeds in establishing itself as meaningful is not only a liberation from the past but also a re-

organization of the structure of language, which, consequently, gives language its future” (79).

As noted by critics, Merleau-Ponty’s concerns in studying the intersections of language, culture and history from a phenomenological and onto-epistemological perspective after his *Phenomenology of Perception* represent a constant in his works. While Merleau-Ponty’s interest in language and perceptual expression and particularly in vision is present throughout his thought, he establishes a connection among “authentic speech,” vision and ontology through the notion of *voyance*. Such relation can be noted in his essay “Eye and Mind” (1964) and his unfinished notes that appeared posthumously as “Cartesian Ontology and the Ontology of Today” (1959-60) (Carbone 28). In trying to define a “new ontology” Merleau-Ponty explores art, particularly painting and literature. By drawing on Da Vinci’s idea of simultaneity or *voyance* in painting to represent “the thing that makes itself seen (outside and inside), over here and there,” Merleau-Ponty contends that contemporary poetry starting from Rimbaud is also able “to bring simultaneity to expression,” which in turn becomes a characteristic of contemporary ontology (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Carbone 33). Thus, in the relation of mutual perceptual recognition between the human and matter, *voyance* “renders present to us what is absent” (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Carbone 33). As developed in “Eye and Mind,” for Merleau-Ponty the painter “*while he is painting*, practices a magical theory of vision. He is obliged to admit that objects before him pass into him or else that, according to Malebranche's sarcastic dilemma, the mind goes out through the eyes to wander among objects; for he

never ceases adjusting his clairvoyance to them” (166). This sort of analogical relation experienced between the seer and the seen constitutes an instance where thought and language work together in the construction of expression. According to the aesthetician Mauro Carbone, the analogical moment provided by *voyance* allows “bodies and things [to] recall each other, establish new relations, invent lines of force and of flight ...” (33).

The phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach synthesized in *reversibility* and *voyance* favors the analysis of how Bellessi’s and Oliver’s poetics constitute an “authentic speech.” *Reversibility* concentrates what I contend represents the phenomenological dimension of Bellessi’s and Oliver’s poetic portrayals of the American landscape, which articulate nature as a living and active agent where perceptual experience becomes a means to dissolve the nature/culture dichotomy and to un-settle nature from exclusionary ideological and epistemological representations that render the natural world as a passive and objectified background. The *reversible* bodily experience conveyed by Oliver’s and Bellessi’s poetic voices in their contacts with nature incorporates information from the full range of senses, with specific emphasis on vision and audition. This perceptual *reversibility* becomes a quality that makes their poetry particularly apt for a philosophically based analysis. The phenomenological dimension of Bellessi’s and Oliver’s poetics of landscape enables the poets to transcend the subject/object divide by reconnecting the human and the non-human through relations of mutual recognition that they articulate in their poetic discourse. In addition, Bellessi’s and Oliver’s experience of *voyance*, while being-in-nature,

transforms into instances of creative expression since in the course of bringing matter into discourse, through an analogical relation, the poets ground language into the natural world to produce new meanings. With this onto-phenomenological approach to language, the poets make matter visible bringing it back into epistemological processes of knowledge production.

Oliver's and Bellessi's poetics of landscape offer an eclectic perspective to address the culture/nature dichotomy, as their concerns for issues of language and representation manifest an ecological awareness that promotes an alternative view to relate with the natural world and, thus conduct an analysis through the lens of ecocriticism and material feminism. Although ecocritical works in the U.S. can be traced from the 1970s forward, it is not until the early 1990s that ecological literary scholarship institutionalizes itself as a field of study. As such, ecocriticism is primarily focused on the analysis of language, representation and epistemological constructions regarding the relation between nature and culture from interdisciplinary perspectives (Glotfelty xxiii-v). Within such views, ecofeminist critical practices date as far back as 1970 and consolidate within literary studies from 1990s onwards. Ecofeminism as an interdisciplinary methodology is concerned with analyzing interconnected forms of oppression against nature and "women across patriarchal societies. It is also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism and neocolonialism" (Gaard and Murphy 2-3).

On the other hand and although material feminists acknowledge the contributions made by feminist theory's emphasis on social constructionist models and postmodern thought to challenge and deconstruct socio-linguistic and ideological concepts that define and disempower women, they criticize feminist theory's "flight from nature" (Alaimo and Hekman 1-3). Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman contend that feminist theory, and particularly postmodern feminism, rather than deconstructing the dichotomies of language/reality or nature/culture has actually privileged textual and socio-linguistic discursive practices that have resulted in a retreat from materiality (3). That is, in trying to "make matter matter," material feminists advocate for a reconceptualization of nature that no longer accepts nature "as a pliable resource for industrial production or social construction" but instead considers new interdisciplinary approaches to grasp how nature as an "agentic force" interacts with humans in dynamics where both parties are impacted (Alaimo and Hekman 7). Thus, material feminism examines "the interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the "environment," without privileging any one of these elements," while it argues that discourses have material impacts on the human and non-human that demand "ethical principles" to transform into "ethical practices" (Alaimo and Hekman 7).

This "material turn" in feminist theory, using Alaimo and Hekman's words, encompasses theoretical interactions among different fields of study but particularly with feminist science studies. Such interdisciplinarity is seen in Susan Hekman's article "Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism" which reviews the four "settlements" or outstanding approaches leading to a definition

of a new paradigm in contemporary theory that aims to overcome the dichotomy between language and reality. With this respect, Hekman's notion of *disclosure* assembles the most relevant ideas proposed by these approaches and endorses the claims that scholars from different disciplines are making regarding the need to supersede the dualism between construction and reality. Hekman argues that feminist and critical theory, in being unable to articulate new critical tools that integrate materiality in discursive terms and practices, are facing an untenable crisis. This epistemological crisis has prompted scholars such as Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, among other outstanding feminist and non-feminist philosophers of science and epistemologists, to produce works that in Hekman's view have influenced the emergence of materiality-oriented approaches that have led to the construction of the ballast of a new theoretical paradigm. Out of all these new theoretical perspectives contributing to articulate a theory "that incorporates language, materiality, and technology into the equation," Hekman identifies philosophers of sciences Bruno Latour's, Andrew Pickering and Joseph Rouse's conceptions as compounding the first settlement (92).

Although these scholars elaborate different concepts and emphases to bring back the material into discursive practices and theory in sciences studies, their ideas coincide not only with the need to break down oppositions, but also with the assumption of nature as an agentic force that interacts and impacts humans in dynamics of mutual transformation. Hekman recognizes the difficulties that may arise to conceptualize the notion of the nonhuman as agentic. She therefore highlights the material epistemological shift that these philosophers

propose since “resolving the question of science and society is a necessary first step in defining a new settlement” (96). Thus the second settlement, is represented by emerging epistemological positions that attempt to bridge the differences between “Continental and Anglo-American analytic philosophy” (Hekman 96). Hekman underscores Linda Alcoff’s efforts to reconcile these philosophical traditions by proposing to decenter their debates from epistemology to ontology while acknowledging “that our only access to ontology is through the discursive” (Hekman 98).

A third settlement with regard breaking down oppositions is constituted by Deleuze’s and particularly by Foucault’s postmodern theory as approaches that, in Hekman’s view, accomplish that deconstruction of the dichotomy between discourse and reality. Hekman claims that a different interpretation of Foucault’s analysis of discourses enables us to notice his realization about the influence of discourses on materiality and how they “participate in defining a particular social reality” so that Foucault’s thought is considered “as an effective deconstruction of the discourse/matter dichotomy” (100-1). The last settlement is mainly informed by the theories of the feminist critic and philosopher of science, Karen Barad. According to Hekman, Barad’s most relevant contributions rely upon her notions of “agential realism” and “intra-action.” “Agential realism” as an epistemological and ontological framework incorporates the insights of social constructionist and postmodern theories. It proposes to focus on the interrelationship between materiality and discursive apparatuses so as to grasp how “theories make particular aspects of reality agentic and that this agency has real, material –and,

most notably – political consequences” (105). From this perspective, reality, in Barad’s view, “is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind the phenomena, but of “things”-in-phenomena” that are constantly intra-acting to produce different kinds of agential relations in the world’s becoming” (135). For Barad, agency “is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world,” where the observer and the observed are involved in a causal relationship between “the apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena produced” (132-5). Thus in Barad’s view, discursive practices and materiality are mutually entailed in dynamics of intra-activity, which in turn implies that “[n]either is articulated/articulate in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated ... apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena they produce are material-discursive in nature” (140).

Hence Hekman embraces the main insights that these settlements offer in order to argue that the emerging new paradigm results from the interplay between ontological and epistemological intra-actions that assume that even as we know “there is a world out there” and that “... we know the world through the concepts and theories we have formulated,” we reject the prevalent assumption of language as constituting reality (Hekman 109-111). Through this lens, Hekman’s *disclosure* alludes to bringing to light aspects of the same reality from different perspectives in order to enable us to compare the material consequences and usefulness of the epistemes and discursive practices that we use to address issues of knowledge and reality. Hekman’s notion of *disclosure* likewise encompasses not only an onto-epistemological dimension for grasping or apprehending materiality, but also an

ethical and political one. These dimensions are put into motion by *disclosing* the impact that the use of specific concepts and critical tools produce in our environment, which might allows us to work for potential social and material changes.

Chapter One: Forging a “Dream of Mutuality:”

Nature, Discourse and Cultural Memory in Diana Bellessi’s *Sur*

“Si aquello que nos sostiene es la ilusión, celebraremos entonces estas montañas, estas llanuras, este *musguito en la piedra*”¹

This chapter offers an analysis of the interrelationship between language, perception and nature in three of Diana Bellessi’s poems “Naturaleza encantada,” “Ah pequeño mensajero” and “Delicada desnudez,” all of which appear in her collection *Sur* (1998). This analysis explores how Bellessi’s phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach to the natural world produces ethical discursive practices that contribute to democratize historical discourse and to overcome the nature/culture dichotomy. Thus, the examination and interpretation of Bellessi’s poems is introduced by a succinct account of the poetic traditions Bellessi numbers among her immediate literary influences, and the resulting critical insights are related to the poetics of landscape she constructed in some of her previous collections to *Sur*.

Descended from an Italian immigrant family of peasant origins, the poet, essayist and translator, Diana Bellessi was born in 1946 in Zaballa, Argentina. After Bellessi studied philosophy at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, she spent from 1969 to 1975 travelling across the American continent. During these years, the young poet, who was driven by the Whitmanian idea of feeling part of

¹ Diana Bellessi, *Lo propio y lo ajeno*, 81.

the whole and of America as “la patria grande” visited different countries and places such as the south of Chile, the Amazonian rainforest, the Guatemalan Tikal and the United States, where she lived for two years and met the poets Muriel Rukeyser and Adrienne Rich, among other remarkable U.S. poets. This travelling experience not only represents a landmark in Bellessi’s life, but also becomes the raw material of *Buena travesía*, *Buena ventura*, *Pequeña Uli* (which dates from 1974 but was published in 1991) and of her second collection of poems *Crucero ecuatorial* (1981). The bond Bellessi built with U.S. contemporary women poets during her stay in the United States favored the publication of the poetic anthology *Contéstame, baila mi danza* (1985), a translation of outstanding U.S. contemporary women poets such as Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Lucille Clifton, among others, and *The Twins, the Dream* (1996), a collection co-authored with Ursula K. Le Guin where they translate each other’s poetry. Critical studies of Bellessi’s poetic works suggest that in her poetry can be traced not only literary influences as diverse as that of the U.S contemporary women’s poetry and the Chinese poetic traditions, but also of the Latin American poetic tradition led by José Martí, Gabriela Mistral and Alfonsina Storni. In this regard, Bellessi’s place within a Latin American poetic tradition must also acknowledge the direct literary influences of Argentinian male contemporary poets such Ricardo Molinari, Francisco Madariaga and Juan Gelman (among others).

In attempting to draw a genealogy of Argentinian women’s poetic tradition, the poet and literary critic Alicia Genovese identifies Alfonsina Storni and Alejandra Pizarnik as the founding voices of a poetic discourse continued by

poets such as Olga Orozco, Juana Bignozzi, Amelia Biagioni and Susana Thenón, which is further enriched by European, North American and Latin American women's writing (Genovese 53-4). While acknowledging the inadequacy of the term "generation" to categorize poetics as heterogeneous as those of Bellessi, Irene Gruss, Tamara Kamenszain, María del Carmen Colombo and Mirta Rosenberg, Genovese analyses them as representatives of the women's poetic generation of the 80s. According to Genovese, although the poetic voices of these authors produce different kinds of discourse, their poetic work coincides in that they articulate a "double voice," whose prevailing "discurso de mujer" follows the challenges established by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Delmira Agustini, Gabriela Mistral and Rosario Castellanos (24). Such a "double voice," in Genovese's view, represents "una articulación que para constituirse necesita desarticular" (25). Along these lines, the author, translator and literary critic Jorge Monteleone argues that Bellessi's feminine discourse, as pertaining to the Argentinian poetic discourse of the late 80's and early 90's, is also characterized by "un redescubrimiento de lo material y una epifanía de lo concreto; una exploración del pasado y la historia a partir de vínculos familiares; una adhesión a la lengua en la palabra maternal; una apelación a la memoria como fundación de la especie y no como nostalgia ..." (12).

Another aspect that defines Bellessi's poetry is the wide thematic range that her poetic discourse enunciates with respect to issues of violence and oppression of indigenous peoples, human rights violations, gender and homoeroticism, social injustices, language and nature, to name just a few. For

Monteleone, Bellessi's poetic work constitutes a "utopia del habla" that embodies an aesthetics of multiple overlapping voices that resonates through a feminine and *matricial* voice, an ethnic expression and a voice of memory and nature (9-11). The *matricial* voice alludes to an expression that transcends gender dichotomies and which is developed by the biologist and philosopher Humberto Maturana. Maturana uses the term *matricial* to refer to a social order where social and gender relations are constructed neither in opposition nor in hierarchical dynamics of subordination and appropriation, but through participation, inclusion and mutual support (44-48). Regarding Bellessi's expression of nature, several critics suggest that while Bellessi's views of the interrelationship between language and matter can be noted throughout her poetic works it is particularly salient in *Crucero ecuatorial* (1981), *El jardín* (1993) and *Sur* (1998). In fact, Bellessi's *Crucero ecuatorial*, as a metaphor of the poet's journey into the material, socio-cultural and historical American landscape during 1969-1975, can be considered as Bellessi's first outline of a landscape that renders visible by means of enunciation what hegemonic discourses have either veiled or silenced.

The poet's cruise across the human and non-human American landscape, as the poet and literary critic Javier Bello remarks, includes cities, countries, mountains, rivers, ports, small bays, flora and fauna, foods and fruits, ethnicities, myths, legends and people where they all "se vuelven reales en el discurso a través del reconocimiento adánico: una constante necesidad de nombrar la totalidad de lo existente y organizar el paisaje del gran país americano para hacer(nos)lo propio" (Bello n.pag.). *Crucero ecuatorial* signals the beginning of

Bellessi's quest for an expression that through the act of naming not only brings to light the material world and its memory, but also unsettles the American topography from partial socio-cultural representations of its human and nonhuman landscape. Bellessi's exploration of the *intra-action* between language and landscape throughout her poetry is relevant since in so doing the poet aims on the one hand to democratize historical discourse by restoring identitary constituents that have been repressed and excluded by hegemonic discourses and, on the other hand, to provide new ways to cognize reality in order to unsettle the nature/culture dichotomy. In this sense, the poet's discourse engages in an ethical and political commitment to reverse the logic of imperial appropriation, which she synthesizes in her idea of "lo propio y lo ajeno."

Bellessi's explorations of language and nature include perception, especially vision, as a means to access the natural world and discover landscape "tanto en su ancha multiplicidad como en sus mínimos tesoros" (Monteleone 15). For Monteleone, Bellessi's "poetic look" in nature provides representations where landscape "no debe entenderse como una mera escenografía referencial de lo terrestre, sino más bien como un campo de sentido y a la vez como una escena imaginaria..." (15). Thus, the poet continues journeying into the possibilities of a language that *discloses* landscape in ontological, epistemological and phenomenological dimensions in her collection of poems *El jardín*. If Bellessi's *Crucero ecuatorial* embodies the trope of journey, *El jardín* might be considered as a metaphor of a borderline site of enunciation whereby the poetic voice bridges culture and nature. Although the poetic voice's inventorial drive in *Crucero*

ecuatorial might recall the standard mode of epic journeys, her journey into the American landscape is not functional to warlike metaphorical discourse. Rather, Bellessi's poetics of landscape in this collection is closer to Mistral's poetic treatment of nature in volumes such as *Tala* and *Poema de Chile*, as the poet embarks on a historical rereading that in reopening the past attempts to create a sense of belonging leading to forge a notion of future. Bellessi's poetic works constantly revolve around ethical premises that *disclose* what dominant discourse has veiled since for the poet the act of *remembering* or recognizing cultural and historical absences might enable us to go on without feeling the weight of an imposed, vicarious complicity.

In this way, Bellessi's *El jardín* becomes, as Genovese notes, a stop in the poet's journey and a space where "... las dos líneas que atraviesan su [Bellessi's] escritura: el detalle y la expansion" converge (103). *El jardín*, as an image that concentrates the coexistence of the human and nonhuman in a small field of vision, is surveyed by the poetic voice through her poetic look. The poet interacts with nature deploying vision to make visible, capture and share the magic of the moments when the natural world reveals itself in its nakedness, beauty and vulnerability. The poetic voice *discloses El jardín* by focusing on those details that the common eye unable to transcend egotism overlooks since "tener un jardín es dejarse tener por él y su / eterno movimiento de partida. Flores, semillas y / plantas mueren para siempre o se renuevan ..." ("He construído un jardín" 469, lines 25-27). Bellesi constructs her garden as a borderline site that allows the poetic voice to on the one hand, access and contemplate the rapture of nature's

vital cycles in its never ending seasonal movements. On the other hand, the poem attempts to overcome the dualism of subject/object by acknowledging that “ser vulnerables nos enseña / un sueño de mutualidad / Lo que se ha mirado bien quizás / se alza para siempre en la mirada...” (“¿El horror es un detalle?” 494, lines 31-34). Bellessi’s “sueño de mutualidad” involves the participation of the human and the nonhuman in. To transcend this division she develops a poetic look that “...detenida en el / detalle entra / a un espacio vaciado / de reconocible ética” (“Flácida, una hoja pende” 451, lines 13-16). Monteleone contends that in Bellessi’s poetry it is possible to sense not only “una ética de la mirada” where “la mirada es sobre todo una *relación* entre sujeto y objeto, donde no hay fijeza en ninguno de los dos polos,” but also a poetic gaze that establishes the “...paisaje natural como campo de visión, no de una anomia de la naturaleza, sino de la verdad” (16-17). This “truth” that the poetic voice discovers in nature is found, according to Monteleone, by practicing the tradition of “epifanía del paisaje” started in the modern Latin American poetic tradition by Mistral and continued in poets such as Ricardo Molinari, Juan L. Ortiz, Hugo Padeletti and Francisco Madariaga (25). Monteleone’s arguments and assertion of Bellessi’s *oeuvre* as constituting a poetic system are insightful and relevant for the purpose of this study. By the same token, I extend his notion of Bellessi’s works as a poetic system by arguing that this system is constructed upon an ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach that enables the poet to act on language in order to include difference, dismantle binary thinking and ground language in the sensible world.

Unsettling Landscape to Listen to “lo propio”

The volume *Sur* opens with an excerpt of a dialogue taken from *El fin de un mundo* (2003), which is a line of research that the Franco-American ethnologist Anne Chapman conducted during the 60s with the last survivors of the Selk’nam people who then lived in Tierra del Fuego, Chile. Thus *Sur* starts with a multiple dedication, naming Lola Kiepja, the last Selk’nam woman, Agustina Kilchamal, a Techuelche indigenous woman and Ailton Krenax, a Brazilian indigenous activist. All of these allusions stand as representations of “las voces anónimas que en los dichos y en los cantos de los Pueblos Americanos, aún forzados en la escritura, violentados en la traducción, han sido el manantial del que abrevan los poemas de este libro” (Bellessi 5). With this opening, Bellessi establishes a cultural and topographical imaginary of *Sur* starting from Tierra del Fuego and proceeding into the south west of the United States. As a cultural chronotope, *Sur* evokes the tempo-spatial consequences of European colonization in America, signaling the interrelationship among landscape, cultural memory, perception and language as central features of its *arte poética*. The poet’s quest for an expression that re-signifies “un mundo sin nombre para lo propio y / tatuado por los nombres de lo ajeno” provides the context for our cognition about our being in and with the natural world (“¿Has medido el tiempo en tu corazón?” lines 48-49). This onto-epistemological way of being entails a re-examination of the historical and cultural landscape drawn by colonization (“¿Has medido el tiempo en tu corazón?” lines 48-49). Bellessi’s *Sur* rejects ventures such as an archeological, mournful journey into a “paradise lost.” She does not portray a

romanticized inhabited or pre-historical landscape, but rather the unsettling of cultural and epistemological violence against American indigenous peoples through a dialogical relation that is bridged by nature. Such distance from nostalgic or romantic representations of a natural world that celebrate either a return to an edenic indigenous communal past or a retreat to a culturally “untouched” landscape is noticeable in the dialogue of respect and ethical reciprocity the poet maintains throughout *Sur* with Lola Kiepja, Agustina Kilchamal and Ailton Krenax. The poetic voice in *Sur* recurs neither to pre-Columbian or heroic indigenous iconography of the past to articulate ethnic memory, nor does she attempt to speak for the indigenous peoples since as the literary critic Eliana Ortega notes “esta es una voz que no intrusea sino que encantada, maravillada, respetuosa y humilde (humus= tierra) escucha atentamente...” (n.pag). For Bellessi, the voices of the past are not to be retrieved yet they are alive as they speak through the American landscape, where the poet talks and listens to them.

Bellessi’s poetics of landscape in *Sur* discloses not only the history of material and symbolic violence against indigenous peoples and nature that started with colonization and continued through silence and erasure from dominant discourse, but also cultural memory as a historical and material phenomenon that resonates in landscape. The poetic voice enters into the American landscape through a look that unsettles the cultural imaginary fixed by the “imperial eye” in order to bring to light the memory of indigenous cultures and their reciprocal relation with nature. As the poem “Naturaleza encantada” illustrates:

Naturaleza encantada escribió
Cristóbal y a ella sí otorgó la gracia
de alteridad. No a mí. ¿Y yo, a quién?
¿Digo como él tan hermosas tierras?

la muralla extraña de palmeras,
peces por el río como sirenas?
Filo la espada desune y taja
de tinta cargada: nomina, mata

La palabra invasora borra aquello
que primorosa hila la lengua
natal, cuando escucha y habla siendo
reino mutuo de santa necesidad (1-12)

By evoking Christopher Columbus's descriptions of the Caribbean coast, the poetic voice alludes to the mythical construction of the American landscape that Columbus imprinted in his journal during his first voyage to the New World. The speaker's reference to Columbus's representations of the manatees that he confused with imagined mermaids introduces not only the Homeric epic imaginary of conquest, but also the creation of America's otherness. The ironical and challenging tone reverberated by the metonymical allusion to Christopher Columbus through the use of his first name and the old Spanish form of the word

'hermosa' in "fermosa" on the one hand and, on the other hand, with the poet's initial questions indicate the establishment of a balance in the power relations that equals the poetic voice with Columbus. Both stand as explorers of the American landscape, but Bellessi's expeditions into the American landscape do not constitute the epic odyssey of conquest, appropriation and settlement. Hers is a journey of recognition of "lo propio y lo ajeno" in order to claim what historical discourse has turned the "ajeno" as "propio." Thus, "lo ajeno" represents not only a hegemonic discourse that veiled native languages and cultures, but also what separated us from the natural world.

Bellessi's travelling experience around the American continent has translated into her poetic works not only as an expression of life at its highest intensity of newness and uniqueness, but also as a reencounter "con la memoria velada / o vuelta otra" ("Lo propio y lo ajeno" lines 6-7). Relevant to the idea of Bellessi's text as a non-epic expeditionary poem that explores the American landscape to unveil what has been transformed into "ajeno" is the interview that the poets Alicia Genovese and Maria del Carmen Colombo conducted with Bellessi in 1996. They asked her about the motif of journey in her works: "eso que aparentemente es ajeno se vuelve la intensificación de algo propio," to which Bellessi responds that her early travelling experience involves "un fenómeno de revivencialización" (Genovese and Colombo 171). This idea is extended by the poet's statement that travelling implies for her a "revivenciar lo que ya existe en algún lado arcaico de la biografía... Aquellos viajes, como otros que voy haciendo aún hoy, al carnaval en la Quebrada de Humahuaca por ejemplo, me vuelven a

unir con lo propio” (Ibid). The articulation of the trope of journey in Bellessi’s works varies according to the social, cultural and historical background that frames her personal experiences. However, her journeys into the American landscape are driven by the quest for biographical and identitary fragments that are rooted in nature and in its tongues. The poet therefore *discloses* the history of material and epistemological violence wreaked by European colonization, which is expressed by way of the metaphor of the sharpened blade, that is loaded with ink as this is a weapon that “...desune y taja / nomina, mata.” The speaker’s allusion to the genocide of indigenous peoples is expanded through the claim of language and discourse as instruments of domination and meaning-making that have silenced the voices of native peoples from landscape and history. In this realization of the *intra-action* among nature, indigenous peoples and colonial discourse Bellessi *discloses* language as a means to unsettle landscape from partial and dominant cultural representations, and thus to reconnect with cultural memory. In this regard, it can be argued that Bellessi’s poetics of landscape in *Sur* constitutes a Merleau-Pontyan “authentic speech.” The authenticity of that speech owes to the way the poet acts on language by incorporating phenomenal reality in her expression and by producing counter-meanings in relation to colonial and epistemological violence. Along these lines, Bellessi’s postcolonial discourse in *Sur* similarly conveys an “agential realism”² insofar as her phenomenological and onto-epistemological perspective to address landscape by acknowledging its *intra-action*, first, with cultural and identitary memory and

² Karen Barad. See, p.15.

second, with colonial and neocolonial violence produces a counter-hegemonic agential relation in discourse that might have a positive impact in reality. Bellessi gives great importance to language and particularly to oral tradition since as she states “relatos y coplas fueron mi arsenal primero y los fundamentos de mi lengua personal” (*Lo propio y lo ajeno* 57). The poet indicates that language represents a “propiedad material...que configura el cuerpo de la historia” (*LPA* 57). These statements are significant because the metric construction of “Naturaleza encantada” as a poem written in couplets of “arte mayor” with a mostly regular assonant rhyme transcends the symbolic gesture stated in the dedication that opens up *Sur* to transform the collection into a concrete homage to the oral tradition of indigenous cultures and thus, to cultural memory. Similarly, the poet’s use of enjambment intensifies the idea of motion to produce a musicality that evokes the “canto oral” and prompts readers to read the poem aloud. The allusion to oral traditions echoed by the sonorous motion of the poem is also emphasized in the title of the poem, since “Naturaleza encantada” suggests the poem as a “canto” of nature. This rhetorical move attempts to combine the oral with the secular tradition, which, as Monteleone notes, happens throughout *Sur*, in order to make audible the cultural memory of indigenous peoples and to historicize it. Bellessi recognizes the problem of how “la palabra invasora” not only erased and silenced native languages from historical discourse, but also cancelled the expression of nature or the “reino mutuo de santa necesidad” in which these voices resonate. As “Naturaleza encantada” reads:

Sentarse ahí, hilvanando nombres
con el latir del corazón. ¿Tarea
que a sus niños reclama pacha, mapu
mamái, dulce tierra ahora abierta

a la voz que surge del manantial?
Como carne al hueso atada flamean
lo necesario y la gratuidad
Perdido es lo perdido, ahora

resuelto en el humus de lo virtual
Mas es el sueño viviente que a las
formas sostiene, mismo cauce del
río, un quieto oír, revivenciar

Volver a ti, signo que demanda es
ser el otro, dejarnos ser a mí
volver. Tersa ley, torpeza de la
música que apresa y no libera

su latir. No aún. ¿Quién gime aquí? (13-29)

According to Bellessi, “los antiguos llevan / nombres / amarrados a la tierra”
 (“Lo propio y lo ajeno” lines 129-131). The use of the word “hila” and

“hilvanando” connote the dialectical relationship implied in the idea of indigenous languages as informing nature. That idea is stressed by the introduction of the ontological and ethnic imaginary by way of the word ‘earth’ or “pacha, mapu, mamái” in Quecha, Mapudungún and Guaraní. The speaker fosters the cultural imaginary embodied by her dedicatees, who symbolize “un supuesto linaje con maestros americanos” (Genovese and Colombo 184). In other poems of the collection, she reinforces this commitment by deploying the Sanskrit word Mahatma to refer to them since in *Sur* these American voices represent “nombres de la creación y el sueño.../ Nombres del amor ganados / en ríos de la mente y en sus actos” (“Nombres de la creación y el sueño...” lines 1, 4-5). To know these names or the indigenous American cultures in their non-dualistic relation with nature might enable us to learn how to relate with matter in times when our very existence risks becoming an archeological fact. Bellessi’s phenomenological and onto-epistemological dream in *Sur* urges us to listen to and connect these names with the heart’s beats or with an ethical approach to nature. Although the poetic voice wonders rhetorically if the earth demands her children to listen to the voices emanated from landscape, she knows that remembering these names constitutes a vital need, as is indicated by the metaphorical allusion of dependency and complementarity between flesh and bone.

The reconnection with cultural memory and nature or “lo necesario y la gratuidad” allows us to realize that “perdido es lo perdido,” that is, something that cannot be retrieved, but what is “resuelto en el humus de lo virtual” is neither lost nor dead. Bellessi’s metaphor of the “...sueño viviente que a las / formas

sostiene” concentrates her phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach to the natural world since the return to nature or to the “sueño viviente” suggests not only the possibility to reconnect with materiality and cultural memory through perception, but also a different way of cognizing reality. By establishing a symbolic dialogue with Kiepja, Kilchamal and Krenax that is bridged by nature, the poet attempts to overcome the culture/nature dichotomy and to restore the memory of an identitary origin that hegemonic discourse has very nearly erased. Such attempt has its intellectual basis in Bellessi’s essay “Los del infinito me han hablado” that appears in *Lo propio y lo ajeno* (1996). The essay opens with Ursula K. Le Guin’s quote “la tierra informa a la mente” in order to introduce Bellessi’s views regarding the *intra-action* between nature and culture and consequently, her rejection of the nature/culture dichotomy (*LPA* 81). Bellessi acknowledges that her voice is an expression constituted by culturally hybrid representations of a landscape that colonization marked and transformed since “donde había bosques se extienden praderas, las especies nativas, de las que pocos reconocen los nombres, se mezclan con aquellas traídas de Europa por los colonos; flora y fauna remodelada, la propia geografía remodelada, para responder a intereses económicos, sí, y también para volver reconocible al mundo” (*LPA* 81). However, the cultural representations of indigenous peoples are articulated neither on the subject/object dualism nor on the colonizing logic of appropriator/appropriated. As the poet states “la tierra informa a la mente y la mente tiene figuras o lengua equivocadas. Equivocadas por decir otras: las del apropiador” (*LPA* 83). Therefore, to listen to the voices Bellessi’s Mahatmas

whisper through landscape might enable us to learn the natural world as an agentic force that is neither to be possessed nor, as she states, “para retenerlo, sino para dejarlo ir en los que vienen y será derecho y responsabilidad de los que vienen lo que se tome, lo que quede o no, lo que persista o no” (Genovese and Colombo 185). Bellessi’s ethical perspective to address nature claims for the recognition of materiality as an agentic force with which we cannot continue relating ourselves under colonial and hierarchical logics of domination. Her perceptual and onto-epistemological approach is based not only on this anticolonial premise as one of its articulating principles, but also on empathy as the lines “volver a ti, signo que demanda es / ser el otro, ...” suggest. In this way, the poem closes by alluding to the tension represented by the poet’s attempts to assemble the vernacular with the secular tradition in her poetic expression. As previously discussed, “Naturaleza encantada” suggests the poem as a “canto” of nature, however “encantada” or enchanted also implies the idea of being imprisoned by what is enchanting the poetic voice, which in this case is the music. However, this music is not the one of the oral tradition, but the one of the more cultivated or literary poetic tradition. The last lines of the poem suggest the poet’s struggle with the conventions of traditional poetry and her efforts to forge an expression with its own rhythms and forms. Therefore, although the poetic voice admits her failure to achieve this goal, as the phrase “no aún” indicates, this phrase at same time signals her promise and commitment to continue with her quest.

Disclosing Nature to Keep the Illusion Alive

Bellessi's tribute to indigenous peoples' cultures, languages and oral traditions in the Americas is framed within a geographical and historical landscape imprinted by a silence and erasure that was started with the European conquest. According to the poet, this cultural and epistemological violence extends up to "the south of the north" or, in other words, the south west area of what is now the United States. The poet redraws the American landscape by including myths, legends and languages where allusions to supay (the devil in Quechua), the Mexica god Ometeótl, Navajo myth and legend, Kiva, Hozho, the Ácoma people, Wupatki, the Grand Canyon, saguaros, ocotillos, corn and squash contribute in the articulation of a "cultural humus" whereby *Sur* is constantly moving across. Nevertheless, *Sur* would not be possible if "... el sueño viviente que a las / formas vivientes sostiene" were absent. Bellessi's depictions of the natural American landscape celebrate the beauty and perfection of the "gratuidad" we find in our flora and fauna. The poet journeys into the American landscape through perception in order to establish a dialogical relation with matter that overcomes the culture/nature antinomy. As "Ah pequeño mensajero..." reads:

[.....]

Ahora que aleteas

tan cercano y soy quizás

árbol de fronda blanca

que plácido te mira

con un amor de árbol
quizás?, si posible fuera
trasladarse en el alma
de la variedad. Ah
pequeño, tu no temor
es el amor que me das
el misterio del aire
a la raíz atado (6-18)

Mostly written in lines of “arte menor” that constitute a long poem, “Ah pequeño mensajero...” might well be one of the poems that best expresses the celebratory aspect of Bellessi’s poetics of landscape. By focusing on the fluttering wings of a hummingbird, as readers discover through metaphorical allusions and the invocation of the bird’s name in several indigenous languages “kenti omogha tujtán / mainumbí...,” the speaker’s laudatory tone opens the poem manifesting her love and marvel for the hummingbird’s beauty and grace (lines 28-29). The speaker creates a poetic imaginary where bodily perception bridges a relation of mutual acknowledgement between the hummingbird and herself as “ahora que aleteas / tan cercano y soy, quizás” indicate (lines 6-7). The speaker’s mutation into a seeing tree introduces a “reversal of anthropomorphism,” in Paul de Man’s words, that represents a moment of *voyance*. The transformation of the poetic voice into a sentient tree becomes an instance of *voyance* since vision engages with the sensible in a relation of synesthetic analogy whereby matter somehow passes into the seer by making visible the absent. In imagining itself as a tree that

feels love for the bird in a tree-like manner, as the phrase “con un amor de árbol” emphasizes, the poetic voice relates analogically to matter while bringing to light a representation of how an expression of love by a tree could be. This analogical relation implies a mutual reciprocity between the human and the nonhuman that allows the speaker to reverse anthropomorphism and consequently to dissolve the subject/object dualism. Thus, the deployment of the modality adverb “perhaps” to refer to the phenomenological aesthetic experience of *voyance* implies the speaker’s acknowledgement of her inability to speak for nature, which is stressed by the conditional expression “...si posible fuera.”³ However, the hummingbird’s “no temor” toward the speaker establishes a dialogical and non-hierarchical relationship of mutual recognition that enables the speaker to displace egotism and experience an epiphanic moment. In her essay “La aprendiz,” Bellessi acknowledges Mistral’s late influence in her poetry and points out that in Mistral’s poetry “hay un lugar que no tiene adentro ni afuera. Una extrañeza encantada donde el tiempo suspende su lógica, es decir la secuencia. Hay un entrar allí, un instante de gracia cuando el yo retrocede, aunque acompaña a quien llamaré la *aprendiz*” (*LPA* 42). This “instant of grace” represents not only a moment of poetic rapture, but also a juncture when the nature/culture divide is transcended. The relation of mutuality created by the horizontal relation between

³ J. Scott Bryson argues that Mary Oliver’s use of expressions of uncertainty such as “as if” or “as though” as cases of pathetic fallacy that indicate either “rhetorically ethical gestures that acknowledge that the poet is appropriating nature for her own ends,” or the poet’s realization of the impossibility to know with certainty how the perceptual experience of a non-human entity might feel or what it might look like (92).

the bird and the poetic becomes a threshold that might enable the human to demystify nature since to realize that “el misterio del aire” is “a la raíz atado” requires the human to recognize itself as a constituent part of the whole represented by matter. In addition, this epiphanic instant mobilizes the allegorical sense of the poem, since by stating “bendito, bendito seas / mundo al que pertenezco / pequeña serpiente alada / kenti omogha tujtán / mainumbí abierto,” the poet at once celebrates nature’s gratuitous magic and evokes the indigenous cultural imaginary as an exemplary non-dichotomic relation with nature (lines 25-29). The analogy between the plumed serpent of the Aztecs and the indigenous names for hummingbird displays what can be considered as the founding aesthetic or basis upon which *Sur*’s poetics of landscape is built, that is, the creation of a place and space consciousness that bridges cultural origins with present. The non-linear notion of time that characterizes Bellessi’s poetics of landscape in *Sur* is allegorized in the hummingbird as the only bird that can fly backward and forward. The imaginary of cultural memory articulated in *Sur* does not enter into the poem retrospectively since it coexists in the same tempo-spatial frame within which the poem is articulated. The mythological and ethnic connotations of the hummingbird as a plumed serpent connect Prehispanic American cultures with American indigenous cultures in the present in order to offer a sense of place and cultural space as an alternative in the forging of a notion of future. While place is depicted through the bird and all of the material representations of the American landscape we find in *Sur*, space refers to landscape as life and creation, as suggested in the sacred status and symbolism within indigenous cultures that the

hummingbird embodies when regarded as either plumed serpent or “kenti omogha tujtán mainumbí.”

The lines “... [t]u amor / es puente, canal desde / aquí, una región / americana al mundo / si permanece abierto / el corazón ...” suggest the poet’s realization that a non-dualistic relation with matter is conditioned to an ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological perspective to address the culture/nature dichotomy, as the contrast introduced by the conditional “if” emphasizes (lines 31-36). The metaphorical allusion of an open heart that should be kept open concentrates the poet’s idea of an ethical gaze to approach nature, which in turn implies a relation of *reversibility* or a reciprocal recognition between the perceiver and the perceived “... que coloca al yo del que escribe abierto en su vulnerabilidad, participante en la naturaleza, afectándola y afectado por ella –y este es quizás el misterio del diálogo– ...” (*LPA* 79). As the poem continues:

[...] Sí, háblame

y yo a ti. Dicen que

debajo de la tierra

las piedras se mueven y

si quitas una en cada

primavera, otra vendrá

lentamente a ocupar

su lugar en el otoño

Echan raíces. Regresan (36-44)

Perceptual *reversibility* achieves a level of mutual acknowledgement that enables the poetic voice to imagine a dialogue with the bird, which recalling oral tradition is conveyed as a legend. In alluding to nature's life as an organic entity the poem not only evokes the idea of mind as informed by nature, but also overcomes the discursive borderline between the oral and written tradition. The narrative nature of Bellessi's poems in *Sur* can be noticed either in her poems and prose poems; however, such narrativity in her non prosaic poems is accomplished through a balance between the meaning of the lines and in the syntax. The deployment of enjambment is complemented with punctuation to reduce the pause in the lines and put meaning into motion in order to emulate the sense of orality that is common in folk tales. In this way, the poet's word of hope and love for nature is ready for the hummingbird to pollinate the landscape with its message, as the poem closes: "Así dice la gracia / de la fe enamorada / Ve, mensajero, no hay / temor. Hoy será mañana" (lines 50-54).

Mutuality in the Forging of Future

Similar to the previous poem, in "Delicada desnudez" the poetic voice enters into landscape through perception, this time concentrating on a caterpillar. The speaker opens the poem by praising a motional "delicate nakedness" and

welcoming its presence in *Sur*. This “delicada desnudez” or nature’s magic materializes as a graceful insect, as the poem illustrates:

[...] Majestuosa en

pequeñez, oruga negra,

bosquecito de espinillas

verde claro por espalda

Trepa, ola diminuta

qué belleza tan perfecta

Quedo viéndola subir

sobre el tronco inmenso

de un plátano inclinado

hacia las aguas del Santa

Rosa. Metro a metro hasta

[.....]

[...] Qué precisión

perfecta hermana oruga,

qué amor por vos me arrebatada (5- 15, 17-19)

The antithetical phrase “majestuosa en / pequeñez” zooms in the presence of the caterpillar as an animated “bosquecito de espinillas” whose delicate beauty prompts the speaker to a state of emotional rapture that is achieved through vision. The speaker’s dialogue with nature is started by a relation of perceptual *reversibility* that portrays the mutual impact resulting from the *intra-action* between the worm and the speaker. The speaker’s “mirada inmanente” addresses the caterpillar to disclose the invisible of the visible through a metaphorical language that displays how both agents affect each other. The speaker defamiliarizes landscape by producing new meanings, as the worm’s portrayals and the image of the leaning banana tree indicate. In this regard, the metonymic allusion to the bending banana tree is particularly interesting since it reveals the coincidence of the signifier “plátano” with the signified as a fruit, within the tress as wider rhetoric strategy to expand visual meaning.

Phenomenological *reversibility* brings about a change in the speaker’s way of seeing that translates into different representations of landscape. These representations reveal the *intra-action* between the speaker and matter as having produced heightened levels of identification with the natural world. These lead in turn, to build non-asymmetrical discursive agential relations, such as are expressed in the speaker’s rapture over the worm’s perfection and her analogical relation with the insect. Just as the previous poem involved a “reversal of anthropomorphism,” here the speaker’s intimate relation with the caterpillar is

familiarized with her identification as the insect's sister and the use of "vos." The poetic voice continues seeing nature's naked beauty as "liquidámbar que su púrpura / derraman, álamos la / cabellera al aire y más / allá grandeza de lo / viviente donde mis ojos / ven nada ...". However, she knows, as the last three lines suggest, that there is a world which her vision cannot disclose, a borderline where matter turns invisible "... por las formas / de lo visible traído" (lines 26-31). The poet acknowledges that our way of cognizing the world is shaped by binary thinking and cultural and ideological constraints that are brought about by asymmetrical power relations, which is why her poetry does not give up the hope for a "sueño de mutualidad" between the human and the non-human.

Landscape enters into Bellessi's poem when the observer accepts her own vulnerability as one agent more in the "ongoing reconfigurings of the world,"⁴ and not the only one. Such displacement of egotism enables the seer to interact with nature and feel herself "por un instante parte de ella, y es esta integralidad la que celebra" (*LPA* 79). As the poetic voice celebrates for being allowed to see the caterpillar's "delicada desnudez," in her words: "Gracias por abrir la puerta / Se puede detrás de ti / mirar al mundo. ¿Lo ves?" (lines 23-25). The speaker's ethical gaze in landscape produces the experience of *voyance* as seen in the following lines: "oruga santa, quisiera / tu movimiento de mar / Sentir hacia la cima / por la rama, o lo tengo / ya, en la comunión de ti, en tu confianza?" (lines 34-39). The caterpillar has been enthroned as a saint, while the poetic voice

⁴ Karen Barad. See, p.15.

petitions for a relation of mutuality. This relation would, if the request is granted, let her experience the world synesthetically, as is symbolically illustrated by the rite of communion. However, the use of the final question mark introduces ambivalence to suggest on the one hand that her wish has been conceded and, on the other hand, that a synesthetic communion with nature is not possible until landscape is seen through a renewed or ethical gaze.

Bellessi's *Sur* acknowledges that the *intra-actions* between language and matter produce asymmetric agential relations which might be dismantled through discourse as her poetics of landscape achieves. *Sur's* onto-epistemological approach to nature places perception at the core of its articulation, because phenomenal experience represents for the poet a means of cognition that cannot continue to be overlooked. According to Bellessi, nature's limit has been exceeded and so "ha llegado el tiempo de *vigilarnos*" (LPA 86). This time of watchfulness requires a phenomenological and onto-epistemological perspective to overcome the culture/nature dichotomy that demands ethical practices to relate with nature. These ethical practices might enable us not only to recognize nature as an agentic force with which we relate in dynamics of mutual impact, but also to restore "el diálogo perdido" in order to advance in the construction of a "universalidad que repose en la diferencia" (LPA 86-7). Bellessi's idea of a universality built upon difference embodies *Sur's* most genuine effort to reconnect with both nature and cultural memory in order to forge a notion of future. For the poet's message is one of hope that believes that "en la limpieza de

/ la mirada está el / secreto ...” (“El espíritu conoce” lines 46-48). This secret is the one that the voices of the First peoples whisper in landscape, that is, “the dream of mutuality,” the dream for a world where we learn to see each other with love.

Chapter Two: Unsettling “What We Know” to Re-learn to Know Nature
in Mary Oliver’s Poetics of Landscape

“My conscious thought sings like a bird in a cage,
but the rest of me is singing too, like a bird in the wind”⁵

The study of modern and contemporary U.S nature writing is a tradition that has often been associated with the British Romantic and U.S. Transcendentalist literary tradition. In this regard, Mary Oliver whose poetic works have received growing critical attention since the 90s onwards has not been the exception. Her nature poetry, whether directly or indirectly, has been regularly compared to that of British Romantic and U.S Transcendentalist poets such as William Blake, Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson as it can be seen in the works of Douglas Burton-Christie and Sandra Gilbert. With this respect, Janet McNew’s critical study stands out as presenting an analysis that distinguishes Oliver’s poetic discourse from the Romantic tradition. According to McNew, contemporary Romantic criticism has misunderstood the nature poetry of women poets such as Mary Oliver, H.D. and Audre Lorde because of “unexamined gender bias” and “particularly in regard to mythic relations to nature” (60). In McNew’s view, Oliver’s poetry differs from Romanticism since she articulates a subjectivity that distances from mythic patriarchal assumptions of nature as a non-speaking objectified *other*, and she challenges patriarchal constraints by ignoring “their defining powers” (62-72).

⁵ Mary Oliver, *Winter Hours*, 98.

McNew's critical insights are relevant because her feminist reading of Oliver's poetic discourse allows for the identification of articulating constituents that differentiate her poetry from her Romantic predecessors. Nevertheless, unlike McNew's and other gender-oriented critical positions about Oliver's poetic expression as seeking "a dream of oneness with a maternal earth-womb," I contend that Oliver's poetry does not retreat from the symbolic order of language to the pre-symbolic (McNew 75). Rather, as my analysis will demonstrate the poet acts on language from within in order to forge an expression that contributes to unsettle the nature/culture dichotomy. My examination of Oliver's poems "Mockingbird," "On Losing a House" and "Last Night the Rain Spoke to Me" of the collection *What Do We Know* (2002), explores how perception, language and nature *intra-act* in her poetics of landscape to construct a phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach that offers different perspectives to cognize matter that are based on ethical premises.

Born in 1935 in Maple Heights, Ohio, Oliver has spent most of her life living around New England landscapes, which has led her to develop a strong sense of place she evokes in her poetry. Although Oliver has been to England, the Far East, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand and Indonesia, she does not consider herself as a traveler in a conventional sense (*Winter Hours* 94). Oliver's inexhaustible journeys into lived landscape cancel the possibility of categorizing her as either an introspective journeyer or as a traditional traveler. In this regard, Oliver's travelling experience into the natural world distances her from poets such as Emily Dickinson, whose travels are mainly interior, and places her closer to

contemporary poets such as Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and Pattiann Rogers. Oliver's experiences into lived landscape have encouraged her to write poetry for more than forty-five years, and to produce essays about the craft of poetic writing, her literary influences, her experience of writing and events that have impacted her life. These autobiographical and literary accounts offer, as she states, "something that must in the future be taken into consideration by any who would claim to know me" (*WH* xii). Oliver's prose works disclose significant personal aspects of her life and the influence of Romantic poets that she identifies as her forebears and models. Oliver's essays are tremendously valuable since they enable readers to know the poet better and to approximate questions about the extent to which there are aspects whereby her poetic discourse relates to those of her Romantic precursors. Among the authors Oliver notes as her "great ones" are Shelley, Fabre, Barbara Ward, Blake, Wordsworth, Frost, Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, to name just a few. These writers matter for Oliver as "they were dreamers, and imaginers, and declarers; they lived looking and looking and looking, seeing the apparent and beyond the apparent, wondering, allowing for uncertainty, also grace ..." and thus, she has learned from them "to observe with passion, to think with patience, to live always care-ingly" (*WH* 20). Although Oliver's remarks suggest general characteristics through which her nature poetry might be connected to the Romantic tradition, her essays about Wordsworth, Frost, Emerson and Whitman shed light on specific aesthetic traits that relate and distinguish her poetic discourse from her Romantic and Transcendentalist forebears.

While Wordsworth and Frost teach Oliver that the world's beauty and strangeness may equally offer brightness and darkness, she also learns from Frost that rapture or "the great height," which she considers his poetic works to lack, cannot be absent in poetry (*WH* 52). Likewise, Emerson, whom she regards as one of her mentors whose absence has impoverished her literary and emotional life, taught her the importance of vision, as she states: "[t]he one thing he is adamant about is that we *should* look –we *must* look– for that is the liquor of life, that brooding upon issues ...” (*Long Life* 51, 46). Another important aspect Oliver highlights in Emerson is his realization of his rootedness in a world that cannot be disassociated from its socio-cultural nature, since in her view “Emerson would not turn from the world, which was domestic, and social, and collective, and required action” (*LL* 48). Along these lines, when Oliver recalls Emerson’s commitment to the abolitionist movement in New England during the 1830s and 1840s, she emphasizes his socio-political engagement as one that achieves the complex task of being both “inspirational and moderate” (*LL* 48). On the other hand, Whitman, whom Oliver considers as the avuncular brother that accompanied her during her childhood (which for her is a period where each poet’s voice begins) taught her that “attention, great energy, total concentration, tenderness, risk, beauty – were elements of poetry” (*Blue Pastures* 97). Oliver thus regards Whitman, through his poetic manifesto *Leaves of Grass* (1855), as a poet who invites readers to reconnect with an individual sensibility. For Oliver, Whitman’s stress on the individual offers “sympathy, empathy, transference of focus from the self to all else; the merging of the lonely single self with the wondrous, never-lonely

entirety” through felt experience (*WH* 65). Although Oliver is uncertain about whether Whitman had mystical experiences, she asserts that in his work there is “a sense of mystical thickness,” that brings him close to the religious Emerson, but which in her view Whitman was unable to report it adequately since “[h]e could only summon, suggest, question, call, and plead” (*WH* 62-3).

Oliver’s reflections on her most prominent literary influences acknowledge a Romantic aesthetic lineage with which her poetics of landscape can be related. Those reflections also constitute a referential frame point of departure for her quest for a distinctive poetic expression. Oliver’s poetics of landscape distances from Wordsworth’s and Frost’s mythical view of nature as a beautiful and terrifying wilderness in that she recognizes matter as a sentient and agentic force that inter-acts in and with the world’s flux. Oliver admits nature’s ferocity, but instead of demonizing its estrangement she naturalizes it. In her view nature and art are bound up in that their mysteries reveal “power without anger, injury without malice...they are both beautiful, and dreadful, and in love with change” (*WH* 104-5). On the other hand, Oliver’s mystical spirituality differs from that of Emerson or Whitman, since her spirituality is not grounded on a theologically driven cosmology, but rather on an attitude that discards any unitary idea of truth and welcomes, instead, the uncertainties and possibilities that the phenomenological experience in landscape lets her explore. In this regard, Oliver’s bodily perception and particularly her poetic look in nature is differentiated from the Emersonian “transparent eyeball” whose connection with wilderness represents a way to “access to Truth and God” (Westling 42). Rather

for Oliver, perceptual experience becomes a means whereby a dialogical relation of mutual recognition with nature that transcends individualism can be established, as her words suggest, “[e]ventually I began to appreciate ... that the great black oaks knew me ... that they recognized and responded to my presence, and to my mood. They began to offer, or I began to offer them, their serene greeting” (WH 96). Similarly, Oliver’s last remarks posit a difference with the Whitmanian merging into nature since her relation with the natural world goes beyond an identification that enables the displacement of egotism to become part of the whole. Oliver’s phenomenological perspective to approach nature establishes a relation of *reversibility* where the perceiver and the perceived recognize each other in order to bridge a non-hierarchical dialogue between the human and the nonhuman. This brief account of the distinctiveness that can be found in Oliver’s poetic discourse in relation to her Romantic models indicates that her poetry should be considered neither as a “replication of a romantic accomplishment” nor as “a “belated” version of modern visionary romanticism,” but rather as a committed effort in the quest for a proper expression that contributes to unsettle the dichotomy between nature and culture by exploring non-idealized ways (McNew 61).

Oliver’s poetics of landscape is thus not only characterized by a phenomenological approach to matter that dismantles mythic representations of nature as a silent objectified *other*; she also brings matter into discourse to present it as an active agent with which she relates in dynamics of reciprocal recognition, informed by a social and ecological awareness that does not ignore the world’s

historical, social and cultural aspects. Although, Oliver's poetry mainly revolves around a phenomenological and onto-epistemological exploration of nature she portrays through its geologies, flora and fauna, her works reflect on themes related to gender and colonial and postcolonial oppression and domination of Native American peoples, as the oppression and marginalization of U.S. indigenous peoples wreaked by European colonization and its aftermath is a theme intermittently represented throughout her works. Along these lines, the literary critic Robin Riley Fast examines those of Oliver's poems that appear in different collections so as to argue that her treatment of white domination over the U.S. indigenous peoples acknowledges an inherited historical complicity in their cultural and political exclusion whose present consequences include the poet's retrieving the Native bond to nature as a model in her quest for a holistic relationship to world (n.pag.). The fact that Oliver is neither an ecological activist nor an environmentalist writer, at least not as they are commonly conceived, might well recall as her own position as a poet her consideration of Emerson as being "inspirational and moderate." However, her ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological perspective to address nature expressed in her efforts to translate into her poetic discourse the calls nature makes "over and over announcing your place / in the family of things" entitles her poetry with a transformative power that is complementary to the socio-political aspirations of ecocritical and environmentalist criticism in the formulation of theoretical tools that provide sustainable alternatives to deal with ecological devastation and

different forms of environmental oppression and domination (“Wild Geese” lines 17-18).

Oliver’s poetics of landscape urges us to overcome the division between nature and culture since to acknowledge ourselves as belonging to materiality is a necessary step in the construction of any effort leading to subvert the self-destructive rationale that has prevailed in our way of relating to the natural world. For Oliver, there is no sense in privileging the human over the non-human since “[t]he pine tree, the leopard, the Platte River, and ourselves –we are at risk together, or we are on our way to a sustainable world together. We are each other’s destiny” (*WH* 102). Hence, Oliver’s collection *What Do We Know* hails readers to wonder, as the title suggests, whether we have learned to cross the frontiers of rationalized individuality that strands us beyond our selves, that is, of our familial relation of correspondence with materiality. In this sense, *What Do We Know* represents the poet’s elaborations on an expression that in incorporating phenomenological experience into lived landscape and an epistemological questioning of our ways of cognizing the world contribute to overcome the nature/culture dichotomy.

What Do We Know opens, as is common in Oliver’s works, with a dedication to her now deceased long-life partner, the photographer Molly Malone Cook (2005). Following this dedication appear two epigraphs, one by Emerson “[t]he invisible and imponderable is the sole fact” taken from *Letters and Social Aims*, and another by St. Augustine “[m]y mind is on fire to understand this most intricate riddle” from *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. These epigraphs

announce the leading principles of the epistemological explorations upon which her collection is articulated. By suggesting that what is beyond the visible and cannot be determined is the only certainty on the one hand and, on the other hand, the difficulties to understand the “intricate riddle,” the poet alludes to the limits of knowledge as a rationality that has been built upon partial “truths” insofar as they have denied the nature/culture indivisibility. Our inability to grasp that we are bound to matter by ties of correspondence and relations of mutual impact have misled us to construct a deficient knowledge whose consequences are leading us to dangerously reach limits that demand an epistemological reformulation. This realization is one of the driving forces in Oliver’s *What Do We Know* since the poet advocates for a phenomenological and ontological re-articulation of knowledge to relate with matter, which she offers through her poetics of landscape.

Unsettling Mindscapes to Know What is Out There

Oliver recognizes language as a means not only to unsettle partial and exclusionary representations of landscape that contribute to reinforce the division between nature/culture and discourse/matter, but also to bridge such separations. By the same token, in her collection *What Do We Know*, the poet explores an expression that assists in the achievement of these goals while being able to convey the language of nature. As the poem “Mockingbird” illustrates:

Always there is something worth saying

about glory, about gratitude,
But I went walking a long time across the dunes
and in all that time spoke not a single word,
nor wrote down, nor even thought anything at all
at the window of my heart.

Speechless the snowy tissue of clouds passed over, and more came,
and speechless they passed also.

The beach plums hung on the hillsides, their branches
Heavy with blossoms; yet not one of them said a word.

And nothing there anyway knew, don't we know, what word is,
or could parse down from the general liquidity of feeling
to the spasm and bull's eye of the moment, or the logic,
or the instance,
trimming the fingernails of happiness, entering the house
of rhetoric. (1-16)

The prosaic poem "Mockingbird" provides a portrayal of nature where landscape, more than constituting a natural catalogue composed by a diverse range of vegetal and animal species that people landscape, depicts a living community which the poet joins in her walks and whose interactions become the source from which her poems spring forth. Unlike other times, when the poetic voice walks out into landscape by enunciating her gratitude to nature, as the contrast introduced by the

conjunction “but” suggests, this time she decides not to use language –whether in its spoken or written form– to address nature. This decision, which indicates the speaker’s realization of language as conditioning thought, thus, opens into her attempt to articulate an expression that represents a thought that is constituted in relation and with phenomena. Nature’s response to the poetic voice’s silence connotes a *reversible* relation of mutual recognition between landscape and the speaker – as implied by the speechless clouds and beach plums – where perception becomes their means of communication. The speaker’s emphasis on nature’s silence throughout the second stanza and particularly in line ten “...yet not one of them said a word” not only demystifies and unsettles the notion of nature as a silent and inanimate agent, but also demonstrates how discourse and matter engage in a dynamic of *intra-action* that places nature as an active participant in the constitution of meaning.

The intricate grammatical construction of line eleven introduces several ideas that interrelate in order to refer to language as an epistemological constraint to relate and know matter. On the one hand, the speaker’s assertion of “[a]nd nothing there anyway knew, don’t we know ...” suggests nature’s rationale as free from the epistemological burden imposed by “the house of rhetoric” and as unwilling to give up or interrupt its freedom by entering language, as is illustrated by the consecutive allusions in lines 12-14 and stressed in “trimming the fingernails of happiness” On the other hand, “... don’t we know, what a word is” connotes our ignorance of matter and consequently of its language since for Oliver the “word” refers to nature’s language as is indicated in the prose poem

“The Word” that precedes the poem “Mockingbird.” In “The Word,” the speaker performs a preacher who conveys the word of nature to an audience that is divided between those people who do not want to listen and so leave the room, versus those whose “hearts are open” and who stay to listen to “the word,” that is, “the song in the forest ...” (“The Word” line 12). As the “Mockingbird” continues singing:

And yet there was one there eloquent enough,
all this time,
and not quietly but in a rhapsody of reply, though with
an absence of reason, of querulous pestering. The mockingbird
was making of himself
an orchestra, a choir, a dozen flutes,

a tambourine, an outpost of perfect and exact observation,
all afternoon rapping and whistling
on the athlete’s lung-ful of leafy air. You could not
imagine a steadier talker, hunched deep in the tree,
then floating forth decorative and boisterous and mirthful,
all eye and fluttering feathers. You could not imagine
a sweeter prayer. (17- 29)

The speaker’s perceptual experience in nature is emphasized through listening,

which enables her to articulate an expression that represents a thought that has incorporated nature in its constitution and in so doing it enacts a different way of cognizing matter. This phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach allows the poetic voice to defamiliarize the familiar and to *disclose* the mockingbird as the voice of nature. The analogy of nature's communal expression with a rhapsody, which is an ecstatic and animated instrumental composition that does not follow a regular form, implies the idea of language as constrained by human rationality, which is reinforced by the speaker's description of the rhapsody as being pleasant because of the lack of reason. On the other hand, the mockingbird, as a bird whose ability to imitate the songs and sounds of other birds and natural creatures, is presented as the embodiment of nature's language. This idea of the mockingbird as symbolizing and enunciating the voice of nature is emphasized through the musical allusions and the bird self-fashioning an orchestra. In this regard, the poet's use of figurative language to intensify meaning is noteworthy, particularly in that case of the musical effect that is produced in lines 24-25, "all afternoon rapping and whistling /on the athlete's lung-ful of leafy air." Here, the speaker's assertion of the mockingbird as "rapping and whistling" is stressed and perfectly achieved by the use of alliteration in line 25. Finally, the speaker's direct address to readers in the sentence "you could not imagine" performs a double function. Firstly, the assertion of the addressees as not capable of imagining hails the readers by inverting the explicit intentionality of the negative sentence so that they join the speaker in the act of imagining and seeing the mockingbird "... hunched deep in

the tree, / then floating forth ...” in order to listen to his prayer. Secondly, the same sentence concentrates the poet’s criticism of rationality to hindering the possibilities of reconnecting with nature and therefore perpetuating the dichotomy nature/culture. In this regard, imagination for Oliver plays an important role in the reformulation of our way of cognizing or knowing the world. Her constant calls to readers to imagine so that they experience the lived landscape that the poet offers in her poems can be heard throughout this collection. These calls to readers’ imagination constitute another effort of Oliver to help us realize that the magical portrayals of nature her poetry provides are not fictional but real and available to anyone who wants to see them.

On Caring About Our Home

As I previously argued, though Oliver’s poetry is neither controversial nor overtly political, her commitment to the unsettling of the nature/culture division is a driving force in her works, one that reveals her views of art as a means for social and material transformation. Along these lines, Oliver considers that “it is madness to set art apart from other social and spiritual endeavors. Writing that does not influence the reader is art that sleeps, and misses the point. Not infused with conscious intention, nor built upon polemic, a poem will inevitably reflect the knowledge and the outlook of the writer” (Magazine *Sierra* Oliver qtd. in Bryson 76). This quotation expresses well Oliver’s aesthetic and ideological position with respect to art and how her knowledge and reflections might be found in her works, that is, in an “inspirational” and sagacious,

“moderate” way that can be appreciated in her poem “On Losing a House.” While the narrative of the poem illustrates denotatively the loss of the speaker’s house, her repetitive allusions to capitalist ideology epitomize an astute rhetorical move to convey, on the one hand an energetic critique of capitalist power and, on the other hand to express her concerns about its influence in the perpetuation the nature/culture dichotomy and the endangerment of the natural world. As the poem reads:

2.

Where will we go
with our table and chairs,
our bed,
our nine thousand books,
our TV, PC, VCR,
our cat
who is sixteen years old?
Where will we put down
our dishes and our blue carpets,
where will we put up
our rose-colored,
rice-paper
shades?

3.

We never saw

such a beautiful house,
though it dipped toward the sea,
though it shook and creaked,
though it said to the rain: come in!
and had a ghost –
at night she rattled the teacups
with her narrow hands,
then left the cupboard open –
and once she slipped – or maybe it wasn't a slip –
and called to our cat, who ran to the empty room.

We only smiled.

Unwise! Unwise! (14-39)

[.....]

Written in seven stanzas of thirteen lines each, “On Losing a House” opens telling readers about how bees, due to their ability to memorize colors and patterns of shapes, “know where their home is” and consequently, “...fall from the air at / exactly the right place” (lines 2,6-8). The contrast introduced by the poet’s deployment of the word “home” to refer to the bees’ dwelling and her criticism to capitalist ideology and power transforms the poem into an admonitory reflection on the potential loss of our home-the world, as well as on the need to learn to relate to matter differently. Oliver’s phenomenological experience not only enables her to know the behavior of bees, but also to *disclose* how natural creatures have a sense of place that is rooted in the environment they inhabit as

opposed to people's attachment to material goods, as the second stanza suggests. Likewise, the speaker's indication of bees as being able to memorize "every stalk and leaf / of the field" not only represents a counter-hegemonic agential relation that unsettles the common assumption of insects as non-cognizing creatures, but also places them as active agents from which we should learn (lines 4-5). Furthermore, this discursive reversal demonstrates how matter and discourse relate in dynamics of *intra-activity* since in seeing how insects cognize, the observer and the observed engage in the articulation of a meaning that the speaker translates into discourse in favor of matter.

On the other hand, the enumeration of things normally used in contemporary life stresses the speaker's colloquial tone in order to produce an effect of familiarity that involves readers in the narrative of the poem. Thus, the speaker's inquiry about where she and her companion will go with all those things they own, now that they have lost their house, suggests the question "where will we go" as a hail that invites readers to reflect on the futile and detrimental aspects of materialistic ideology regarding the eventual possibility of losing our common home. The accumulation and pursuing of material goods as an end in itself is a force that drives and controls people's lives and divert us from our inextricable connection with the natural world and our responsibility for its mandatory protection. Likewise, Oliver's non-dualistic perspective toward matter is introduced in the third stanza in its most radical dimension, that is, through her belief in that inanimate things are also alive. For Oliver, "...the world makes a great distinction between kinds of life: human on the one hand, all else on the

other hand... Which are neither of them distinctions I care about. The world is made up of cats, and cattle, and fenceposts! A chair is alive. The blue pond, and the blue bowl on the table, that holds six apples, are all animate, and have spirits” (WH 99). Such belief is portrayed in the speaker’s regret for not having realized before how the house they lost was animate since “[w]e never saw / such a beautiful house, /.../though it shook and creaked, / though it said to the rain: come in!” (lines 27-28, 30-31). Oliver’s mystical cosmology accepts not only the possibility of the world as an indivisible field of energy that flows among everything there is in it, but also the existence and coexistence with spirits, as the presence of the female ghost in the house suggests.

The allusions to money, in the fourth stanza, as the cause of the loss of her house make explicit not only the poet’s rejection and criticism of capitalist ideology as ruling people’s lives, but also their defenselessness before its seeming omnipotent power. As the speaker states, “O, never in our lives have we thought / about money./ But someone else / can sign the papers, / can turn the key./ O dark, O heavy, O mossy money.” (lines 41-42, 49-52). The speaker’s angry tone is intensified by the negative connotation implied in the adjectives that describe money, in order to set the context for the extension of her critique in the next two stanzas. Not only does the speaker address corporate capitalists as responsible for the loss of her home, but she also points them out as originators of environmental destruction, as the following lines suggest:

5.

Amazing

how the rich
don't even
hesitate – up go the
sloping rooflines, out goes the
garden, down goes the crooked,
green tree, out goes the (lines 53-59)
[.....]

6.

Don't tell us
how to love, don't tell us
how to grieve, or what
to grieve for, or how loss
[.....] (lines 66-69)

The speaker's challenging tone, as is stressed by the repetition of the sentence "don't tell us," highlights her opposition and resistance to a world ruled by capitalist power, its ambitions and dictates. Thus, the speaker and her companion leave the house by depicting a mutual farewell between them and the house as follows: "[g]oodbye, sweet and beautiful house, / we shouted, and it shouted back, / goodbye to you, and lifted itself" (lines 80-83). Oliver is an imaginer whose non-dualistic worldview leads her to advocate for the possibility of a world where we acknowledge our "familiarity with the family of things" as necessary to the process of re-learning to relate with matter. More than expressing an account of the speaker's loss of her house for not having money to keep it, "On losing a

House” manifests the poet’s concerns about capitalist ideology and power in relation to environmental destruction and people’s alienation from the natural world. Hence the poem hails readers on the one hand to think of the eventual possibility of losing the only place to live we have and, on the other hand, urges us to reconnect and care about the natural world as the only possibility to forge a future while resisting ideological worldviews that reinforce our separation from it.

Imagination as a Means to “Make Matter Matter”

In the poem “Last Night the Rain Spoke to Me,” Oliver continues journeying into landscape to explore nature and the possibilities of an expression that is capable of conveying a non-dualistic and non-asymmetrical relation to matter, one that fosters ethical practices to engage with the environment caringly.

As the poem illustrates:

[.....]

and the grass below.

Then it was over.

The sky cleared.

I was standing

under a tree.

The tree was a tree

with happy leaves,

and I was myself,

and there were stars
that were also themselves
at the moment,
at which moment

my right hand
was holding my left hand
which was holding the tree
which was filled with stars

and the soft rain –
imagine! imagine!
the long and wondrous journeys
still to be ours. (17-36)

Mostly written in iambic feet of monometers and dimeters, “Last Night the Rain Spoke to Me” portrays the speaker’s phenomenological experience into lived landscape by focusing on the falling rain on a tree. Not only does the poetic voice *disclose* rain as a living, speaking and sentient agent, but she also displays the full range of senses moving into action to produce new meaning. The poetic voice listens to the speaking rain which expresses joyous feelings while falling from the sky, as is portrayed in the lines “the rain / spoke to me / slowly saying / what joy.../ to be happy again” (lines 2-5, 8). The emulation of this dialogue implies a moment of mutual recognition that enables a displacement of egotism since the

rain appears as the speaking subject that addresses the speaker to establish communication. Such *disclosure* also reveals how the speaker acts on language to unsettle cultural representations that deem nature as a silent, non-sentient agent as well as to articulate a counter-meaning that results from the non-hierarchical *intra-action* between matter and discourse. The speaker's perceptual relation with nature is expanded by the inclusion of smelling and vision to connect with matter, as the following lines indicates "as it dropped, / smelling of iron, / and vanished /like a dream of the ocean /into the branches" (lines 12-16). The juxtaposition between the smell of iron and the rain evanescent "like a dream of the ocean" over the tree emphasizes the presence of the rain as a non-threatening force that coexists in harmony with the other inhabitants of the natural world.

The speaker remains in nature until the rain leaves, at which point she observes how the sky opens up to welcome the stars. Standing close to the tree the poetic voice insists on nature as capable of expressing feelings, as indicated in "[t]he tree was a tree / with happy leaves" (lines 22-23). The emphasis on the individuality of the tree, the stars and the speaker intensifies the relation of *reversibility* and *voyance* that takes place among them. The poetic voice, the tree and the stars engage in a dynamic of reciprocal acknowledgement that produces, in Merleau-Ponty's words, a "reversibility of the visible and the tangible."⁶ While touching with the right hand the left hand that is touching the tree, the speaker

⁶ In his famous example of the left hand touching the right hand while touching the tangibles, Merleau-Ponty contends that if the sentient body can touch itself while touching another tangible "can turn its palpation back upon it [the tangible]" in order to "espouse things" and create a sense of belonging "to one sole space of consciousness" (*IC* 170).

enters the same “space of consciousness” of the tree and the stars to become another member “in the family of things.” Likewise, there is a crisscrossing of perceptual *reversibility* where the circle of visible intersects with the circle of the touching, which produces an ongoing of perception that circulates among the agents involved. In addition, this intense perceptual relation creates an instance of *voyance*, which the poet highlights through the lines “at the moment, /at which moment” (lines 27-28). The reconnection with matter through this exceptional phenomenological experience enables the speaker to experience a synesthetic relation that allows her to take part in the order of things. This ecstatic moment leads the poetic voice to prompt us to imagine that these kind of overpowering experiences are still out there waiting for us to live them.

Oliver’s poetics of landscape in *What Do We Know* questions rationality as a limitation that perpetuates the separation between nature and culture, while providing a phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach to reformulate of our ways of cognizing and relating with the natural world. The realization of how *intra-actions* occur between matter and discursive practices leads the poet to act on language in order to unsettle cultural representations of nature that reinforce our disconnection with the natural world. In so doing, Oliver engages matter and discourse in the constitution of new meanings that *disclose* nature from different perspectives and thus ground language in materiality. On the other hand, Oliver’s phenomenological approach to the natural world through experiences of *reversibility* enables her to establish relations of mutual recognition that lead to a praxis of care whose ethical dimension reveals that “in order to want to save the

world we must learn to love it – and in order to love it we must become familiar with again” (Oliver qtd. in Bryson 76). The latter is of great relevance for ecological and environmental concerns since it suggests that any effort leading to articulate theoretical apparatuses that provide alternatives to address issues of ecological devastation and forms of environmental oppression and domination must start from that basic ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological acknowledgement. Last but not least, Oliver’s appeals to imagination in her poems to experience the portrayals of landscape she provides become a means to assist readers in the realization that the natural world is out there waiting for us to discover, enjoy and love it.

Conclusion

Diana Bellessi's and Mary Oliver's poetics of landscape offer a phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach to "make matter matter" that produces ethical discursive practices leading to overcome the dichotomy nature/culture. Although the poetic volumes examined, *Sur* and *What Do We Know*, are built upon different thematic axes, they reveal that Bellessi and Oliver coincide in the articulation of a poetic discourse that unsettles the American landscape from cultural and discursive representations that perpetuate the disconnection between the human and the non-human. In so doing, Bellessi re-signifies the historical and cultural landscape drawn by European colonization by *disclosing* the material and epistemological violence against indigenous peoples and nature which was started with colonization on the one hand, and continued, on the other, through the erasure from dominant discourse and the separation between nature and culture. The representations of landscape in Bellessi's *Sur* refuses the romanticized claims found on those writings which would call for a return to an edenic indigenous communal past. Neither does she propose to retreat to a culturally "untouched" landscape, for she is aware that colonization irrevocably transformed landscape and culture. Rather she brings cultural memory into discourse as an ethical and political gesture leading to democratize historical discourse through establishing a dialogue with the voices of the past. Her proposed dialogue seeks to bridge the non-dualistic relations of reciprocity vis a vis nature, that she locates in cultural representations of indigenous peoples, with

a present-day quest for our own ways to reconnect with matter. As a result of this dialogical relation, Bellessi's poetic discourse presents different perspectives to cognize and relate to the natural world based on anticolonial premises, perception and empathy, and the acknowledgement of matter as an active force with which humans inter-act and are mutually affected.

Oliver's poetics of landscape is articulated upon an ontological expression and phenomenological experience in nature, with that combination acting as means to reformulate our ways of cognizing matter and to overcome the culture/nature divide. The poet identifies language as an instrument to dismantle the nature/culture dichotomy, which prompts her to unsettle cultural and discursive representations of nature as a silent, objectified agent by *disclosing* nature as a living and sentient community within which the animate and inanimate inter-act. When Oliver elaborates an ontological poetic discourse, she effectively brings matter back into discourse by including it in the constitution of new meanings and attempts to convey the language of nature. Her phenomenological and non-dualistic approach to nature advocates for the acknowledgement of the world's indivisibility and a relation of correspondence between the human and non-human as both forms of being in the world pertain to the order of things. In so doing, the poet builds a dialogical relation with materiality based on mutual recognition and reciprocity as the basis of her efforts to restore the bond between nature and culture. Thus Oliver's poetic discourse not only proposes a re-articulation of knowledge that entails phenomenological experience as a means to forge an ethical relation with nature, but also a set of non-hierarchical discursive

practices that recognize nature's agency and incorporate phenomena in the constitution of meaning.

The exploration of language as a medium to bridge the dichotomy nature/culture and discourse/reality is central in Bellessi's and Oliver's poetics of landscape. Both of these poets allow matter as an agentic force that relates with humans in dynamics of mutual impact and *intra-activity*. Such realization leads them to act on language by bringing matter into discourse and thus further the reformulation of prevailing dualistic knowledge. Bellessi and Oliver are aware of how the interconnectedness of language/reality and discursive practices produce agential relations that cause consequences in reality, which is why both writers deploy discourse to unsettle exclusory discursive representations that preserve the culture/nature dichotomy. The poets explore the limits and possibilities of language in order to ground it in materiality. They achieve this by creating a sense of place that involves the recognition of matter and a familiarization with the human and non-human American landscape through their peoples, languages, histories, myths, flora and fauna, geologies, and other elements. Likewise, Bellessi's and Oliver's focus on language and perception articulates a dialectical relation revealing that they ground discourse to matter by producing new meanings that are accomplished by a defamiliarization of the familiar, which at the same time enables the poets to ground matter into discourse by simultaneously constructing thought and expression. Oliver's and Bellessi's phenomenological and ontological poetics of landscape enact a non-dualistic approach to matter that offers counter-hegemonic perspectives for cognizing reality and ethical discursive

practices to overcome the discourse/reality division in order to further unsettle the nature/culture dichotomy.

As seen in this study, although Oliver's and Bellessi's travelling experiences cannot be equated, their poetic discourses are connected by the trope of journey since both poets stand as travelers and explorers of lived landscape. Phenomenological experience in nature constitutes an articulating principle in their poetics of landscape since embodied perception allows the poets to reconnect with matter and elaborate different outlooks to know and grasp reality. Although for Bellessi and Oliver vision and audition are the most prominent means whereby they create a dialogical poetic imaginary with nature where the opposition subject/object is dissolved, Oliver's deep connection with matter enables her to transcend corporeal immanence and include touching in the sensorial and imaginative interplay. Oliver's and Bellessi's perceptual experiences of *reversibility* in nature favor not only the construction and redrawing of landscape as a sensorial field they explore to *disclose* what rationalist thought and dominant discourse has veiled, that is, the relation of familial correspondence between the human and the non-human, but also the establishment of ethical relations with matter based on mutuality, empathy and love. Bellessi's and Oliver's poetics of landscape suggest that any attempt at overcoming the nature/culture dichotomy requires an epistemological reformulation of our ways to cognize and consequently relate with matter that includes an ontological, phenomenological and ethical perspective.

The ontological aspect of Bellessi's and Oliver's poetics is closely related to language since the poets bring matter into discourse by dismantling representations of matter as an objectified background and source of exploitation in order to present nature as an agentic force with which humans engage in relations of mutual impact. This acknowledgement in turn implies the poets' realization of the *intra-activity* that occurs between matter and discursive practices. On the other hand, the phenomenological dimension of their poetics of landscape entails a recognition that our bodies belong to the material order as well as that perception constitutes an essential element of knowledge production. These understandings underlie an ethical rationale based on recognition, mutuality, and, more importantly, love. This notion of love however involves neither a hierarchical nor an appropriating logic of relating with nature but rather a relation constructed upon empathy. Thus Bellessi's and Oliver's ontological, phenomenological and ethical poetic discourse acquires an epistemological dimension insofar as the poets concentrate these visions in the quest for new different ways of cognizing, representing and relating with materiality. Bellessi and Oliver offer a poetics of landscape whose ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological premises suggest an approach to materiality that in being constructed upon the belief of that we can learn to relate with the world from another perspectives becomes the basis of a paradigm of hope.

Bellessi's and Oliver's poetics of landscape are committed in the articulation of a paradigm of hope to relate with the natural world whose principles prove necessary in the construction of any effort to overcome the

separation between nature and culture. In this regard, the ecocritic Scott Slovic contends that “nature writers are epistemologists ... although not usually advocating direct political action, do in a sense advocate an awareness that might possibly lead into political action” (qtd. in Adamson 41). Neither Oliver nor Bellessi are activists, at least as they are commonly conceived; however, their ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological perspective to matter entitles their poetry with a political potential that should be considered for ecological and environmental purposes. One of the most common critiques environmental criticism makes of writing that deals with nature is the separation of nature and culture in the portrayals of empty, culturally “untouched” landscapes where individuals retreat from society, which in Adamson’s view “fails to reveal the social, political and economic forces that lead to and justify exploitative, unsustainable uses of the world” (42). In addition, environmental critic T.V. Reed argues that the aesthetic appreciation of nature as that “found in much ecocriticism ... has not only been a class-coded activity, but the insulation of the middle and upper classes from the most brutal effects of industrialization [which] has played a crucial role in environmental devastation” (151). Although I agree with Adamson’s and Reed’s arguments and consider them valuable to foster critical practices and tools that contribute to further alternatives regarding ecological and environmental concerns, I contend that the political potential of literary works such as those of Bellessi and Oliver has been overlooked and underestimated by these kinds of criticism. In fact, an environmentalist lens on Oliver’s and Bellessi’s poetry might likely consider their works as futile for

environmental and ecological purposes as they would not disclose explicitly the socio-economic and political factors that intervene in ecological and environmental problems. However, my argument throughout this study is that Oliver's and Bellessi's approach to nature entails ethical, phenomenological and onto-epistemological principles to address nature that are essential to produce change in our relations with the natural world and, consequently, with the environment.

Ecological devastation along with environmental oppression and domination undoubtedly need immediate attention and urgent action; however, these actions imply a social and political transformation that requires more than the enactment of policies to control our irresponsible way of relating with materiality. These issues demand collective action since for people to realize that “their everyday activities in culture have consequences that flow out through the river channels or float through the air into nature,” we must understand first, that there is a world out there and, second, that we belong to this world as we are tied up by a relation of correspondence (Adamson 42). In other words, we need to produce an epistemological and behavioral change so that people can relate with matter differently and thus be willing to protect it. By stating this, I am not arguing that either ecological or environmental criticism is misleading since I consider that any attempt to raise awareness about ecological and environmental issues must be welcomed. I criticize however, the “efectista” reasoning or positions that avoid addressing central, underlying causes and complexities, on the one hand, and that, on the other, involve exclusionary critical practices. Given

the ever-present compartmentalization of knowledge, the fall of grand narratives and the realization that no single theoretical model can respond to the multi-sided issues that we face within the context of globalization and global capitalist power, among other issues, I think it is misleading to continue with theoretical atomization. Rather I consider that critical and theoretical efforts should aim to subvert the compartmentalization of knowledge by practicing interdisciplinary assemblages of fields of studies and theories in the construction of critical apparatuses, which is one of the reasons I favored the use of philosophical and material feminist theory in this study. From this perspective, I consider that Bellessi's and Oliver's ethical, phenomenological, and onto-epistemological approach to matter brings into play ecocritical and environmental interests.

On the other hand, understanding comparatively the poetic works of Bellessi and Oliver has not only enabled me to know different representations of landscape in the Americas, but also to identify connections from an inter-American perspective. Although in Bellessi's poetry can be traced literary influences of several U.S. contemporary writers, included the work of Oliver, there are two literary referents in Oliver's and Bellessi's poetry whose influences might be bridged in a further study, that is, Walt Whitman and Gabriela Mistral. As I previously argued Oliver admits Whitman as one her forebears. Similarly Bellessi recognizes the late influence of Mistral in her works. Whitman's poetic influence in modern Latin American poetic traditions has been widely acknowledged, and one of the poets who was influenced by him is Mistral. In this regard, I dare say that Whitman's and Mistral's view of nature as a sacred space

that enters into the poem is a characteristic of their poetics of landscape that resonates more in Bellessi's than in Oliver's poetry. Along these lines, it can be argued that Oliver's and Bellessi's construction of landscape as a sensorial field they explore to ground language into matter might also be a commonality that evokes Whitman's and Mistral's epiphanic moments and bridges their poetics transnationally. Another aspect that connects Bellessi's and Oliver's poetics of landscape is the phenomenological relation of correspondence and mutuality they establish with matter as a means to enter into nature.

Thus, as a future scholar and professor of comparative literature who regards education as a means of social transformation, I consider that Bellessi's and Oliver's ethical and phenomenological and onto-epistemological approach to matter represents a valuable pedagogical opportunity to connect politics and literature in order to contribute to the achievement of the epistemological and behavioral change needed to build an ecological awareness. The introduction of works such as those of Bellessi and Oliver into literary courses might favor not only to familiarize and socialize representations of landscape transnationally, but also to start articulating inter-American pedagogical alliances aiming to dismantle dichotomies upon which also rely the causes of our current ecological and environmental situation. To further in this direction is essential to examine the pedagogical and curricular work carried out by environmental justice scholars and professors who have taught environmental courses and environmental literary

courses in the United States⁷ along with Caribbean and Latin American educational environmental experiences.

⁷ With this respect, the pedagogical experiences of environmental scholars such as Roberto Figueroa's, Soenke Zehle's and Jia-Yi Cheng-Levine stand out by the curricular interdisciplinarity of the courses they have taught as these courses cross-list philosophy, environmental, subaltern, ethnic and gender studies.

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