"WHOEVER YOU ARE, WE TOO LIE IN DRIFTS AT YOUR FEET": WALT WHITMAN'S MYSTIC SELF IN JORIE GRAHAM'S WATER POETRY

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Jorie Graham has long held a fascination with Walt Whitman's work and often quotes his poetry in interviews and sees his poems as influences on her own work.[1] While Whitman's influence on Graham's poetry is certainly notable, this article seeks to highlight the ways in which Graham also transposes Whitman's relation to nature into a contemporary context, often writing out of or against his assertion of the self as an assured, universal, and timeless existence. Graham's poetry, while in part continuing Whitman's precedent of reconceptualizing traditional considerations of nature, also urgently reflects the shrinking of the inhabitable world, highlighting how nature, the human, and the self are continually damaged and threatened by our refusal to connect with or see ourselves as part of the natural world.

The complex relationship between Whitman and Graham has been frequently examined throughout Graham's long and influential poetic career, as critics not only note echoes of Whitman within Graham's writing but also explore the ways in which she writes out of and at times against this troubled poetic legacy. While some critics, like Brian Henry, frame Whitman and Graham as embracing a shared connectedness with nature,[2] others see Graham "unstitch[ing] . . . the pages of Whitman's poetic fantasy of America" and rejecting Whitman's notion that a poem constitutes an "incorruptible . . . textual body sustained by a shared corporeal experience."[3] Graham's continued and growing emphasis on the unmistakable realities of the climate crisis throughout her poetry thus reflect her urgency to move away from the notion of an enduring American ideal of perpetual universality and self-(re)creation.[4] Building on the foundational work of M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Christine Gerhardt's more recent insistence on Whitman's ocean poetry as a site of ecopoetic resistance to this "fantasy,"[5] this essay will trace how Graham's more recent experiences of the climate crisis translate and evolve this nature/human relationship to reflect the reality before her.

The following pages, then, will examine the extent to which Whitman's perspective on bodies of water underpins or informs his ontological proclamations and will consider what aspects of this approach to nature survive in Graham's poetry or are transformed therein to reflect the climate crisis in which she writes. Focusing on two sets of poems that speak to each other across time, I explore this relationship between two foundational American poets as it is refracted, diluted, dispersed, and intermingled through water, both as a joint fascination of the two poets and as a key medium through which the human and the natural interact, exchange, and perform their symbiotic dependencies. In this process, I consider the extent to which both Whitman and Graham engage with the global and the local, the universal and the individual/personal, and how these notions of human existence as part of a shared framework are challenged by water's power and placeless identity as a fluid, ever-moving entity. Graham's focus on the erasure and decay of human existence alongside the natural world as a result of the climate disaster offers a unique perspective on placelessness and posits water as both a site of universality and of destruction.[6]

Oceanic Poetics

Whitman's focus on water as a vehicle through which to express both an eternal, transcendental, euphoric experience and the inevitable cycle of life, death, and renewal is the center of my study, particularly how this translates into or is counteracted by Jorie Graham's contemporary ecopoetics. In her introduction to the anthology *Earth Took of Earth* (1996), which includes Whitman's "Elemental Drifts" and the 1867 version of "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life," Graham not only addresses the reader in a typical Whitmanian fashion (particularly echoing the end of "As I Ebb'd")—"whoever you are, picking up this volume"—but notes the surprising ubiquity of water throughout the poems she collated:

> I was struck [when compiling the anthology] by how much of the poetry written in America takes place on water, underwater, at the edge of water, overwhelmed by the mystery of water—drowning in it, wading into it, meditating along its shores.[7]

Graham's own work is awash in the same "oceanic poetics" she references in her introduction, as she frequently returns to the "mystery of water" throughout her collections (most notably perhaps in *Sea Change* and *Fast*).[8] This focus reflects her ecopoetic concerns as the inhabitable earth shrinks and water becomes the vehicle through which geopolitical tension and inequalities multiply.[9] Water refuses to remain static, always becoming, giving life and taking

it away. It is ubiquitous both on our planet and within our bodies, the vessel through which we become part of and mutually dependent upon the natural world.

It is unsurprising, then, that Graham has long held a fascination with "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," perhaps Whitman's most famous water poem. In 1992, she gave a reading of the poem for the Centennial of Whitman's death, for which poets were asked to read Whitman poems that had had the most powerful impact on them and their work.[10] A year later, Graham published *Materialism*, which included a poem entitled "from Walt Whitman's Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," again placing Whitman's poem at the heart of her own poetic investigations.[11] David Baker, in his review of *Materialism,* also finds echoes of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in Graham's poem "In the Hotel," in which the speaker asks "What do you / want, *you*, listening here with me now?"[12] Baker argues that he "can clearly hear Whitman's passionate attempt to situate himself and his readers within the fluid yet constant tide of time in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry'" in Graham's poem.[13] The democratic impulse, the desire to situate "you" with(in) "me" flows through both Whitman and Graham's work, as both seek to draw humanity into a wider appreciation of our commonality and community to varying degrees, both with each other and with the natural world of which we are a part.

Nick Selby traces the evolution of Graham's relationship with the poem, noting that in *Swarm*, Graham grapples with Whitman's self-assurance and belief in a future resurrection or continuance of the self that emerges from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Selby argues that Graham "sees her poetic body as scattered, edited, silenced, and beside herself," juxtaposed with Whitman's "poetic claims to transparency" throughout his work.[14] Here, then, we see the translation of Whitman's transcendental legacy into the changing world, as Graham continues the American fascination with the identity of the self, both individual and communal, but cannot recreate Whitman's certainty of a future within an increasingly unstable climate.

More recently, Graham's 2002 collection *Never* opens with a poem entitled "Prayer," which begins with what Edward Byrne describes as "a situation reminiscent of Walt Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry'":[15]

> Over a dock railing, I watch the minnows, thousands, swirl
> themselves, each a miniscule muscle, but also, without the
> way to *create* current, making of their unison (turning, re-
> infolding,
> entering and exiting their own unison in unison) making of themselves a
> visual current . . . [16]

The celebration of life found here, as the minnows "swirl" from one line to the next in a multitude of Whitmanesque participles ("making," "turning," "re- / infolding"), sinks towards the end of the poem. The long lines of explosive movement that continually feed into one another without end are replaced by the clipped, short sentences that stop the poem: "I cannot of course come back. Not to this. Never. / It is a ghost posed on my lips. Here: never" (ll. 23–24). Graham documents the "aftershocks" of the realization that "Never again are you the same" (l. 14), holding "hands full of sand, letting it sift through / in the wind, I look in and say take this, this is / what I have saved" (ll. 18–20). As Graham's poetic focus shifts towards these apocalyptic, ecopoetic concerns, these realizations—that what has been can never be again—become more frequent. Instead of the transcendental assurance of continued existence, Graham presents an erosion of the self, something slipping away that cannot come back, "a ghost" of what once was. The desire towards the communal for which "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is famous survives in Graham's work, and speaking of *Never*, she describes "the attempt to rebuild the shattered community of the 'we' . . . we have to act in unison."[17] However, as Graham's poetry addresses the growing environmental concerns of our time, Whitman's desire for universality, to fuse one voice to all voices, both human and natural, across time and space, becomes increasingly unattainable.

"The Wake Off the Ferry" is a more recent reinterpretation of Whitman's poem from Graham's 2020 collection *Runaway*. In the poem, Graham again eschews Whitman's expansive, self-assured long line (often utilized to great effect in her previous collections such as *Sea Change*), preferring instead a more Dickinsonian, clipped, abbreviated line that splits words and letters away from each other. This reflects the way that the concept and futurity of human beings dissolves above water, which merely "rebecome[s]" in the wake of such destruction.[18] Using the same setting, adrift on a ferry between the two landmasses, Whitman and Graham offer meditations on water and humanity that share a common transcendental or ecocritical desire towards communality while offering vastly different understandings of our place within that community. Through the following close engagement with Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," I seek to highlight the prophetic, "universal self" established in Whitman's poetry, which then informs my consideration of Graham's translation of Whitman's self into her contemporary setting.

"To me the same as they are to you": Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

For Whitman, the setting of a ferry, a vessel poised between two land masses and dependent on fluidity, creates the conditions in which a fluid sense of self may thrive and reach out to others, unmoored from the confines of solidity to which one may be tied on land. Whitman remarks that "My own favourite loafing places have always been the rivers, the wharves, the boats," and that he "always had a passion for ferries; to me they afford inimitable, streaming, never-failing, living poems . . . communion with the waters, the air, the exquisite *chiaroscuro*—the sky and stars, that speak no word, nothing to the intellect, yet so eloquent, so communicative to the soul."[19] The state of rest, the "loafing" to which he refers in these notes, also provides the conditions for Whitman's communion with the universal and with past, present, and future Americans. In this position, Whitman's narrator speaks the world into being akin to God in the creation story of Genesis. The poem begins, "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!," positioning the water in relation to the human presence which "sees" and validates it through human terms "face to face."[20] The speaker continues to position aspects of the vast landscape in relation to himself—"Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face" (l. 2)—which sets the water and the skies as compass points, with the human perception as the central point out of which all else takes form. Perhaps echoing 1 Corinthians 13:12, in which Paul notes that "now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face,"[21] Whitman places himself in the middle of a creation scene as the mystic figure in communion with the natural world who experiences this transcendental communion with nature, and thus imbues the speaker with divine authority to make such proclamations.

Whitman's prophet-speaker of the natural world is able to "see clearly" that which gives him authority to speak over future generations: "A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them, / Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide" (ll. 18–19). Positioning himself as the center of this landscape, Whitman's speaker not only inhabits these sunsets and tides of the future alongside his own but speaks future passengers into being: "you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence" (l. 5), who "are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose" (ll. 5–6). The repetition of "to me" throughout the first section of the poem builds this scene and the importance of the speaker, plainly making these connections between self and water and self and others

on board. Here, Whitman characteristically assumes knowledge of those to come through this position as the prophet of the natural world, aggrandizing the self as an omniscient, all-knowing eye to those who are more "than [they] might suppose" to him. Through this assertion and assumption of connection, Whitman nurtures the transcendental Universal Being, which acknowledges both the brevity and individuality of individual existence through the double meaning of "myself disintegrated" (l. 7) but also widens the potential of this existence as part of a wider, continual whole, "every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme" (l. 7). Through this shared experience and shared space of crossing, past and future generations step outside our linear understanding of time and individual existence and can exist simultaneously in the speaker's imagination.

The East River, on which the poetic crossing takes place, is not in fact a river but a saltwater tidal estuary in which the water does not flow through but rather moves up and down and in and out, according to the tides. This paradoxical movement within the confines of one place is reflected in Whitman's address to the future generations who will occupy the same space, crossing to and fro, moving from youth to age, and yet performing the same arrested movement as he does. Time and water move together through the poem as Whitman's speaker attempts to join himself to this continual flow onwards while remaining, at least for the moment, held in place.[22]

This timelessness and the connection across the ages are introduced as, in section three, Whitman asserts that "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence" (ll. 20–21). There follows a sequence of "Just as you" statements answered with "I was," which subverts the present tense of Whitman's speaker by applying the present tense to the addressed future generations. By prioritizing their present above his own, Whitman straddles both time periods, moving between his own and projecting himself via an understanding of universality into the future he imagines; "I am with you" becomes the surviving truth.

This abstraction of the human from our perceptions of time is brought about by the contemplation of their surroundings (ll. 22-25):

> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
> Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
> Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,
> Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried ...

As both present and future gaze into the river (or are imagined so to do), their identities as part of the crowd become liquid and expand out from the

physical to the spiritual crowd which spans generations and times. By using this sequential form, again reminiscent of the syntactical parallelism of the creation story in Genesis, Whitman mirrors the "pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide" (l. 19) and so connects the continuity of the addressed generations with this eternally moving water.

Through this assumption of universality and affinity with those to come, however, Whitman erases the possibility of difference of experience and identity and assumes a certain importance of his own identity that must be preserved through this connection. In assuming and asserting that "These and all else were to me the same as they are to you" (l. 49), Whitman uses the privilege of his race, gender, and class to assert his dominance over the future present, erasing all other experience of identity and place in an assumption that "Others the same—others who look back on me because I look'd forward to them" (l. 52). Whitman writes of and considers water as a transcendental wonder of the universe that reveals itself to him in order to expand this sense of self past human understandings of time, place, and mortality into the eternal. Other experiences of water are vastly different: a locus of fear, for example, used to displace people from their homeland, or as a desperate way out of persecution aboard a slave ship.

Dawid Juraszek explains that "Whitman's approach to future generations in the poem is not altogether different from the way nature poetry treats earthly objects as property [from which] to extract personal meaning."[23] Whitman creates these future generations through imagining them as echoes of his own being, and in so doing leans towards a reductive view of future generations as mere resources, "ripe for exploitation and instrumentalization."[24] Here lies a great irony in the poem, as in attempting to universalize and eternalize his experience, Whitman reduces and erases the possibility of otherness, and thereby confines himself to his own experience. This erasure of different experiences is of course not limited to Whitman or even to transcendentalists. The cultural erasure of anything outside the white, male, relatively wealthy perception of identity and existence has defined literature and culture for centuries and continues to do so.

This assumption that "these and all else were to me the same as they are to you" seems also to erase the reality of water, which is constantly moving and reshaping the land in which it moves, never remaining "the same."[25] Instead of upholding the continual flow of the "flood-tide" and "ebb-tide" that run through the poem, Whitman, through this assertion, begins to stagnate the current, moving away from the reality of an ever-changing, ever-evolving landscape governed by and wholly dependent upon water.

Despite this focus on the human connection outside time through water and on the individual as part of this interconnected whole, Whitman also

acknowledges the way in which this body is dependent upon water and continues to use the framework of a mystic, transcendental experience with a higher power as he explores this concept. The speaker asserts that:

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body (ll. 62–64).

Whitman points to the shared human condition of being "held in solution" as the continual ebb and flow of the river surrounds and permeates the musings of the poet and his construction or exploration of the self. Instead of relying entirely upon this continual flow of water on and through the body, however, Whitman characteristically maintains a constant state of self-governance as he asserts that "I too had receiv'd identity by my body" while recognizing this self-governance in his audience as he joins with them in "I too."

This connection and knowledge of a fluid self "held in solution," which stretches on through the centuries, becomes an asset to his mystic identity as Whitman claims that "I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born" (l. 88). Echoing the biblical Psalmists,[26] Whitman positions his prophet-speaker as the author of the scene, an omniscient presence abstracted from linear time who can see all aspects of the present as well as the future and writes the lives of those to come before they have even existed. The dominant master or father role in the Psalm—"thou" who "possessed my reins"—is lessened here, however, as the preceding "I, too had receiv'd identity" places the speaker as one also created by or subsumed into a higher being: the Universal Being which both speaker and audience inhabit.

Consequently, Whitman's account of creation occurs out of a traditional, linear time sequence as he creates future generations' lives while looking back on his own. The reception of "identity" is followed by snapshots of this parallel life: "I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine" (l. 57). The audience is taken through different phases of life, including a darker "patch," as Whitman assures us that:

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,
The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre?
Nor is it you alone who knows what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil (ll. 65–70)

Instead of a God-creator who sees the imperfection of His creation from His own perfect state on high, Whitman admits his own "evil" and the human struggle with "dark" thoughts of irrelevance and impermanence alongside his reader, as "he . . . knew what it was to be evil." Only after this account of inevitable maturity, as human consciousness evolves and begins to question itself and its importance within its surroundings, Whitman unveils his role in creating such a being, that he "consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born." This abstraction of both speaker and audience from linear chronology reinforces Whitman's communion with a Universal Being that exists outside our chronology and equalizes past and present, as "What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you" (l. 87). Instead of the perfect Father creating time-bound, earthly children, Whitman creates his reader on his level, part of the same, of past, present, and future simultaneously.

Whitman's unavoidable attachment to and constant dialogue with the water around him allows this connection with those of the future. The prepositions repeat the flowing sense of water continually connecting people and places and times to one another, such as: "What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face? / Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?" (ll. 96–97), where "into" is repeated to emphasize the "fusing" of "ties" between people. Whitman figures himself as tied to the water through this fluid identity as part of a whole in order to escape his mortality and be "with you" yet retains his own autonomy through this reliance upon "the body" to create and nurture his identity. I now turn to Graham's "The Wake Off the Ferry," in which she translates Whitman's democratic impulse towards futurity and universality into her contemporary ecopoetic context, reflecting the immutable eternity of water in the wake of impermanent human connection.

"to see it rebecome // itself": Graham's "The Wake Off the Ferry"

Graham, writing as an American poet after Whitman, embraces Whitman's prophetic, mystic viewpoint, given authority by this transcendental experience to speak to something outside our perception or understanding. "The Wake Off the Ferry" echoes Whitman's setting of being unmoored from solid land, physically dependent upon the placeless water that upholds the human presence upon it. Graham's speaker is much less certain and assured of her place within this setting, however, as the poem explores the difference between water's continual "rebecom[ing]" (1. 25) as it reforms to "close / back up" (ll. 23–24) after the ferry and the broken human relationship that she gestures to aboard the ferry.

Whitman's anthropocentric river scene, spanning across time, is characteristic of his era. Graham subverts this, however, as the human presence in her poem is pulled apart and complicated by the water's presence, and it becomes impossible to see which is driving the poem. The short lines with no punctuation cut phrases away from each other, pulling other words into contact to create connections that are not immediately obvious. Placing the end of "never again / exactly the / same" (ll. 13–15) next to "when I / love // you" (ll. 15–17) exaggerates the distance between "love" and "you," and seems to translate the "never again exactly the same" of water's reforming onto the brokenness and frailty of the human love that does not quite reach across the stanza break. This is then echoed:

you as you
me never again
are we (ll. 17–19)

This both cements the failure of relationship and splits "you as you" and "me" into two separate entities that no longer "are we," as the beginning of the question "are we the ones / we love" (ll. 19–20) also rounds off this breakdown of connection between the two characters. In contrast to Whitman's account of transcendental unity, of Americans tied together outside time through this shared place, Graham creates an intense locality of "you" and "me" and the rift between "we" around which water easily flows. While Whitman uses water as a vehicle to express the timeless expansion of the human into this fluid state, Graham's poem offers a "wake" for human connection that remains disconnected from the water, which continues past and around us regardless.

This clipped, brief structure also gives the poem a hesitancy that suggests the limitations of the poetic trope of using the natural world as a canvas or symbol for human existence. Instead of asking this of the water, Graham instead interrupts the human relationship with water's presence that flows round the "disturbance" (l. 6) to "rebecome" at the end. These two words, the longest in the poem, create a sense of something at work outside the hesitancy of the speaker, as if telling the story of the water outside our human qualifications and symbols. Through this "rebecom[ing]," the sea becomes something other than a symbol of the relationship between the two humans in the poem, as they go from "we" (l. 3) at the beginning of the poem to the separate "you" and "I," but the water continues on undaunted as "itself" (l. 26). Through this "disturbance" of both the physical water by the ferry, which easily closes back up after the ferry has passed, and the human speaker who is disturbed by this water continually

challenging the sense and flow of their speech, Graham notes the failure of using the sea as a symbol or tool of self-aggrandizement. Instead, Graham suggests that water's vastness stands outside our comprehension as "itself," referring to the sea, stands alone at the end of the poem, unconnected to the human attempt "to see" (l. 22).

Graham acknowledges that water is continually becoming and reforming, as "the / disturbance of / our having / gone" (ll. 5–8) is "close[d] up / again but // never again / exactly the / same" (ll. 11–15). Water's power to re-establish and reform itself transcends human perception in the poem:

. . . I look

as far as I
can see to see
it close
back up (ll. 20–24)

Here, Graham's speaker narrates how water goes on past the limits of her perception, which is complemented by the line breaks that continually disrupt speech.[27] The echo chamber of the repeated "I" and "see to see" suggests that this looking to see does not grant the speaker understanding of the water, which is reinforced by the title of the poem, as "The Wake Off the Ferry" situates the human on the ferry and the wake as "off," unmoored from our manmade constructions.

Although Graham's title is instantly evocative of Whitman's poem and her subject similarly "held in solution," instead of bringing the human into sharp focus and using the water to facilitate a wider existence as part of a universal whole as Whitman does, Graham's poem questions this practice. The human presence is continually vague and unsure, broken up by the brevity of lines that reflect the small waves that "rebecome" the sea as the ferry travels through it. Graham subverts Whitman's model of the water as something with which to engage with eternity and instead acknowledges her own fragility, poised above an entity that so easily "rebecome[s] / itself," even in the "wake" of "disturbance" and human destruction.

In the following section, I present another close reading of a Whitman poem in order to examine a different aspect of his relationship with the natural world, one which seems darker, more mature, and somewhat more aware of his own mortality within the Universal Being. I then consider two of Graham's poems in answer to this evolution of Whitman's approach to water to present a

holistic understanding of the mystic self through both poets' relationship with water and how this adapts and evolves through their vast bodies of work.

"Ebb, ocean of life, (the flow will return,)": Whitman's "As I Ebb'd"

Whitman's "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" moves from the assured, universal self of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" into a more morose, individual contemplation of the speaker's complex relationship with the ocean and his place within eternity. Whitman uses the shoreline as a site of personal and poetic reflection but also acknowledges that the sea's vastness resists such treatment. As Huck Gutman aptly summarizes, the poem "is about fathers, the shore, the failure of poetry, personal inadequacy, and profound uncertainty," as Whitman projects his own complexities of emotion and ontology onto the oceanic vastness before him, personifying it into these parental figures to serve his self-exploration.[28] The sea reacts with a physical, dangerous reminder of his relative insignificance and its power beyond his imagination of it as a symbol for his own emotions.

"As I Ebb'd" presents a bleaker state of mind, occupying one of the "dark patches" of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (l. 65) that casts the speaker into a dejected mood in which "The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious" (l. 67). Whitman creates a somewhat hostile seascape at the beginning of "As I Ebb'd," using the sounds of the ocean to evoke the shoreline upon which he walks:

> As I walk'd where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok,
> Where they rustle up hoarse and sibilant,
> Where the fierce old mother endlessly cries for her castaways (ll. 3–5)

In both content and sound, the poem performs the ebb and flow of the sea as Whitman's aqueous voice trickles down the page and the sibilance echoes the crashing of waves upon the shore. Gerhardt suggests that "the repeated 'As I' of the first three lines emphasizes the initial focus on the self-absorbed speaker, whose mystifying notion of ebbing 'with the ocean of life' evokes sea and shore as external images of his own thoughts."[29] The beginning of the poem assumes this traditional human centrality as the reader's vision follows the speaker, who is in control and dictates the movement of the poem, the "electric self" (l. 7) commanding the reader's attention. As the description of the shore and its inhabitants continues, however, this certainty of self becomes less confident, and the "hoarse and sibilant" voice of the ocean begins to take over the poem. As such, the poem performs the inevitable "ebb" of the speaker into death, but

also builds up a picture of the natural world's unshakeable power so that when the speaker submits himself to the waves and becomes one with the ocean, the "flow" of life, which he assures himself will return, seems possible.

Whitman's anthropomorphising of the sea into a "fierce old mother" underpins the poem and the existential contemplation therein, as Whitman considers both the oceanic "cradle" and "grave" before him and his place as an individual who is born, dies, and will be reborn through the endless waves of its universality.[30] Instead of a positive, affirming proclamation of futurity and connection between here and now and that to come, this poem is a more reserved, personal contemplation of the self and the oceanic vastness thereof. The poem presents the "real Me" which "all my arrogant poems" (l. 28) cannot reach in the face of the ocean, whose depths are similarly intangible. The isolation and loss evoked by the realization that "I have not once had the least idea who or what I am" (l. 27) allows for this conflict between self and the power of nature to overwhelm the poem and its speaker, which leads to the ultimate submission of the self into the waves at the end of the poem.

Through this conflict between Whitman's self and the imagined "mother" of the waves, one can see the maturity of Whitman's vision of nature materialize from a facilitator of his universality to an acknowledgment of its overwhelming vastness and dominance over the individual human. The sea strips away the certainty of the self and human understanding or comprehension, as "I wended the shores I know" (l. 2) turns later into "As I wend to the shores I know not" (l. 18), and Whitman's speaker transcends his human form into the unknown through this communion with the sea. Nature's power becomes militant towards the helpless speaker in the poem:

> I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and that no man ever can,
> Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart upon me and sting me
> Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all. (ll. 32–34)

The natural world "sting[s]" and "take[s] advantage" of the speaker, as though reacting against the former assurance of self and assumption of human power over the natural world. The image of the sea as a "mother" adds to the speaker's desperation, as though the emblem of a universal existence, the sea itself, denies responsibility over the speaker: "Nature here in sight of the sea" persecutes him as reprimand for his past carelessness and assumptions. Gerhardt suggests that "by providing nature not only with agency but also with authority, a subjecthood that resists control, Whitman imaginatively turns the sea and shore into subjects who strain against being conceptually grasped and

thus contained."[31]

Though this walk along the shore is Whitman's canvas for the expression of the smallness of the self amidst the mystery of the universe, as he explores this oceanic expanse before him, it becomes clear that the sea resists such symbolic use and thus becomes an object of fear as it asserts its power over the human. The shore is "a dynamic place," according to Gerhardt, which "momentarily de-emphasiz[es] the speaker's physical and linguistic agency," allowing Whitman to develop an association with the sea which then evolves into the more modern, (now) ecocritical ways of understanding it.[32] By claiming the ocean as "mother" and "father," however, Whitman ties himself to the sea, asserting that "You oceans both, I close with you" (l. 35) as a way to preserve himself within the universal as he surrenders himself to the power of the ocean.

There are echoes within the poem of the mystic character in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," as Whitman's speaker asserts that "I . . . Was seiz'd by the spirit that trails underfoot, / The rim, the sediment that stands for all the water and all the land of the globe" (ll. 6–9). Although the speaker acknowledges in the passive "was seized" that the ocean and its alluring, unknowable vastness have control over the human interloper, there is a definite sense of being set apart, that the speaker has been chosen as a vessel for capturing and translating this transcendental experience of "the sediment that stands for all the water and all the land of the globe" to the reader.

Through embracing his individual, human death, Whitman's speaker is set free into the endlessness of the ocean, assured by the cycles of ebb and flow which govern the natural world. "Ebb, ocean of life, (the flow will return,)" (l. 51), he instructs himself, and the final stanza of the poem is delivered from beyond death: "(See, from my dead lips the ooze exuding at last . . .)" (l. 59). This posthumous address performs Whitman's place as part of this Universal Being, tied to the everlasting endlessness of nature, and exaggerates the relief in the release of his soul from its decaying human form into full communion with the ocean. Whitman uses the archaic literary term for the sea, "ooze," to emphasize this union.

The sea and Whitman's speaker are united into "we," as he addresses "You up there walking or sitting, / Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet" (ll. 70–71). Gerhardt suggests that "Whitman succeeds in both imagining the impossible, namely, our becoming one with the world even as this implies a loss of self, and capturing the very impossibility of such a move as a viable speaking position."[33] The fragmentary voice of the rest of the poem enables

this conclusion, as the desperation, doubt, and resignation of the speaker to the ebbing away of life allow him to submit himself without reservation to the power of the waves before him. Gerhardt notes that "Death here is not a state at the end of a linear narrative, but a presence that connects the poet's body to the natural environment even as he seals his irrevocable distance from it in speaking the words that constitute his poem."[34]

Instead of an inevitable, permanent end, "As I Ebb'd" imagines death as a solution to human frailty, a way to connect "I" to "you," creating the everlasting "we" which speaks on after the death of the individual. This trajectory of the poem also questions the self-aggrandizement of Whitman's other poems, as the submission of the self entirely into nature's motherly arms suggests an admission of his own sub-dominance to the ocean. Gerhardt agrees, explaining that "at the cultural moment when modern environmentalism emerged, Whitman's figure of the dead poet articulating living speech embodies the necessity of an utterly humble, self-effacing" speaker who is aware of his own infancy next to the vast power of the ocean.[35] As the poem develops, therefore, Max Oelschlaeger's observation of "a shift . . . from viewing wild nature as merely a valuable resource . . . toward a conception of wilderness as an end in its own right" during Whitman's time becomes clear, as Whitman begins to understand his shift from assumed master of nature to his position as a supplicant who must surrender himself entirely to become part of the endless futurity of the ocean.[36]

Having established this ecocentric shift in Whitman's relationship to water and nature/human coexistence more broadly, I now turn to Graham's development of this relationship within her contemporary context of the climate crisis, which necessitates deeper engagement with and acknowledgement of our symbiotic relationship with the natural world as its accelerates towards extinction.

"Something feels like it's not / coming back.": Graham's "Ebbtide" and "Dusk Shore Prayer"

Like Whitman's "As I Ebb'd," Graham's 2002 collection *Never* continually returns to a littoral setting to examine the individual's place within the vast, ungovernable natural world. As a poetic response to Whitman's poem of dissolution, "Ebbtide" again challenges our assumptions of the established way of relating to and assigning meaning to the natural world as a flawed way of interacting with it. Graham's speaker in "Ebbtide" records her observations of

creatures and aspects of nature as she walks along the shore but does not use her observations primarily as a means of reflecting on and coming to terms with herself. The title again signals Whitman's pertinence in Graham's writing, but again erases the "I" of "As I Ebb'd" to focus instead on the limits of human perception and authority within nature. Graham's poem observes the split between individual perception of the ocean scene and true communion with or understanding thereof, noting the fragility of the individual self and the hesitancy of a future within the universal.

When asked to offer one of her poems for inclusion in a 2005 collection of poets celebrating Whitman's work, Graham selected "Dusk Shore Prayer,"[37] and so I reflect on this poem too as an answer to or translation of Whitman's oceanic, ecological turn within Graham's water poetry. The poem translates echoes of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" into further meditations on "The creeping revelation of shoreline" that haunt "As I Ebb'd."[38] I trace the evolution of Whitman's shift towards more ecological concerns within Graham's "Ebbtide" and "Dusk Shore Prayer"—two meditations on this space of crossing between human and nature.

Willard Spiegelman acknowledges Graham's focus on the limits of perception and the expansiveness of that which we attempt and ultimately fail to fully perceive when he suggests that "in *Never*, it is the poet herself who wrestles not only with acts of perception but also with activities of control and the determination of destiny."[39] Throughout "Ebbtide," this wrestling with "the act of perception" is clear, as Graham's speaker moves from one observation to the next, ceaselessly onwards towards the climax of the poem in which the "control and the determination of destiny" seem to play out before her eyes. It is through this absolute focus on perception above comprehension or the symbolic function of what she observes that Graham's speaker begins to question her own "determination of destiny," as that which she has experienced and perceived becomes irrevocably past.

Edward Byrne notes that *Never* "particularly suggests new ways of viewing and understanding today's natural world: Graham perceives the landscape with a sense of immediacy and urgency," which is clear in both poems.[40] In "Ebbtide," the speaker builds up the pace of the poem towards the end, acknowledging the absence of futurity and offering no hope of an answering, renewing "flowtide" to come. The poem omits a continuation of human perception after the natural world has ceased to offer it, replacing Whitman's optimistic belief in a future resurrection with the reality that "Nothing is coming back the way it was" (l. 77).

Evoking Whitman's mysticism, Graham begins "Ebbtide" with a similar

positioning of the speaker to that in "As I Ebb'd":

> I am a frequency, current flies through. One has
> to ride
> the spine.[41]

The poem begins as though in the same tone as Whitman's proclamations of authority in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," as a vessel through which the universal may speak. The opening two words echo Whitman's biblical construction, as the declaration of the self, "I am," occurs throughout the Bible as God's self-creation and assurance of divine identity. However, with the admission of anonymity ("a" frequency rather than "the" frequency) and passivity ("current flies through"), Graham's voice is more akin to the bleaker voice of "As I Ebb'd," which acknowledges the lack of human control in the face of such oceanic vastness. Using the anonymity of "one," Graham suggests a departure from the aggrandizement of Whitman's speaker and notes instead the existence of "other / frequencies" (ll. 4–5) that exist alongside her but are not claimed as part of her. Through this, Graham suggests a communality of sorts, but these "other[s]" are equally passive in their reception of the "current" and neither the speaker nor these others have ultimate authority over this scene. Graham translates Whitman's universality into a contemporary context, as the climate collapse brings with it the erasure of past and future, necessitating a more fragmented sense of a reality in which we all exist as "frequencies," together in our shared predicament but not assured of a future.

Instead of a single, divinely inspired mystic given ultimate authority to speak these prophecies to present and future generations, Graham is more focused on the act of perception, the limits of the individual in observing that which they ordinarily assume knowledge over. The identity as a "frequency" rather than a prophet reinforces this, as it sets up the speaker as something through which energy moves or is transferred, but only at specific times and in certain places. These "other / frequencies" to which she refers may have their own visions and prophecies, but these are not revealed to the speaker, who remains merely a vessel through which energy may pass.

This is also explored later in the poem when Graham writes "I'm squatting so I hear / sand sucking water in" (ll. 53–54), which solidifies the notion that human perception is situational, dependent on where the eyes and ears are placed at any given time, and these sights and sounds are only available to the speaker because of her position at that precise moment. Graham's speaker must move along the shoreline to see these different realms of creatures and habitats

and may only observe and record them as they are revealed to her through this contortion of her body.

The omniscience and omnipresence that give Whitman's speaker his grandeur in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" are replaced by the paring down of humanity to its core parts in Graham's poem: the "spine" which conducts energy for a time but will inevitably become "the spine of the picked-clean story" (l. 83), as Graham foretells at the end of the poem. Graham's position as a mystic or prophet in the poem is necessarily brief, as she acknowledges at the end that "One feels one has in custody / what one cannot care for for long" (ll. 75–76). Through this admission, Graham marks the fragility of both that which she perceives and the human eye itself, which will die and become sightless, a reversal of Whitman's futurity of the self looking out over the ageless water in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Instead of becoming one with the "ooze" and surrendering herself to the waves as Whitman's speaker does in "As I Ebb'd," Graham's speaker remains on the shoreline, which highlights the different contexts in which the two poets write. The assurance of a future that underpins Whitman's work is absent from Graham's, and so she may only offer this snapshot of the present moment and the urgency of the feeling that "something" (l. 35) will not come back.

As Graham's poem unfolds, the "I," this "frequency," is made more and more contingent on the surrounding natural world, acknowledging that the perception of "I" or the eye of the speaker is limited by the physicality of one human being wandering along the shore, as "my / gaze can barely reach shore-break" (ll. 64–65) suggests a limit to this vision. The speaker explains that:

> Making one's way one sees the changes.
> What took place before one
> looked. (ll. 10–12)

This positions the mystic self within the frame of an individual human who has knowledge only of an individual lifetime and has no claim to a Universal Being which brings knowledge of the past along with it.

Whitman's "As I Ebb'd" addresses the "ebb" of the individual towards death but finds within this morose contemplation a way through to universality, as the sea is offered as a way to perpetuate the self into the eternal "we." Graham's poem instead suggests an irrevocable decline of "something" into nothing as the speaker warns, "Something feels like it's not / coming back." (ll. 35–36). The repetition of "one" throughout the poem cements this isolation, as it emphasizes the singularity of the speaker, alone and not tied to any certainty in the future. This isolation is echoed through the observed components on the

shore, as everything is "receding" (l. 6) and "unfocusing" (l. 15). The speaker records a "single tubefish, dead" (l. 16), "two vultures feeding on a pelican" (l. 33), and the tone of decay, fragmentation, and destruction continues to haunt the poem.

Writing as Graham does in 2002 on the brink of climate collapse, as the ocean levels rise and become more unstable, the perpetual communion between sea and humanity that Whitman envisions is thrown into doubt, alongside this confidence in future generations who might look out on the same scene. The scene that Graham paints towards the end of the poem, "Looking back / I see the birds eating the bird. The other way my / gaze can barely reach shore-break" (ll. 63–65) is emblematic of this radical change in contexts and the shrinking of the visible, inhabitable world from which Graham writes. Looking back, Graham's speaker can only see death and decay, and looking forward, her perception is limited to that which is immediate as the sense of futurity is called into question.

The observation of the "tubefish" at the beginning of the poem helps to solidify this isolation of the self and the speaker's underlying preoccupation with their inevitable death:

> The single tubefish, dead, long as a snake, half-snout,
> rolled over and over as the waves pick up, return, return
> less often, go away. For a while he is incandescent
> white, then blue, deep green, then white again, until he's
> left, half-turned,
> eyes sandy till one wave, come back
> this far as if in error, cleans him off. (ll. 16–22)

The tubefish is introduced as though a character of some significance, whose death, we assume, will provide the canvas for some proclamation of human emotion, a "memento mori" that inspires the speaker to "carpe diem." This is almost tantalizingly offered as "for a while he is incandescent" genders the fish and so brings him into contact with our human sensitivity, and the grandeur of "incandescent" makes the reader anticipate some symbolic emphasis to come. The enjambment of "incandescent / white, then blue" instantly rejects this expectation and instead continues to describe in a very factual, documentary manner the changing colours of the fish's corpse as it is moved by the natural fluctuations of the shore. The individual death presented here is merely another observable feature, as "dead" begins the physical description of the fish alongside "long as a snake, half-snout." This unemotional observation makes it hard even to feel pity for the creature as it is thrown around by the waves, or "left, half-turned" until a wave "as if in error, cleans him off." The wave's apathetic

treatment of its subject is a far cry from Whitman's "fierce old mother" who "endlessly cries for her castaways."

We may read significance into the scene of the dead fish beginning to decompose on the shoreline as a harbinger of our own destruction and the insignificance of our mortal bodies after death. This significance is not offered by the poem's speaker, however, who continues past this sight towards her own similar future, "the spine of the picked-clean story" without comment. This fragmentary way of observing the natural world around the speaker reflects the "erosion" that erases history and connection. It is also itself a kind of time in the poem as this realization that there will be a "too late," that something will not return, makes the piecemeal, snapshot tone of the poem necessary.

Throughout the poem, this sense that "something" is lost is reflected in the way that each observation of the items on the shoreline is presented as a fragment never pulled into a wider proclamation or sense of significance (as one may expect in a Whitman poem). The speaker addresses this at the beginning of the poem with the contemplation "How often and how hard are answerings" (l. 5), which is performed through the poem, as "answerings" continue to evade the speaker and each observation bleeds into to the next. The only suggestions of significance are unsure, as "One feels word should be sent us / from some source" (ll. 72–73) is not answered by any such reassurance from a higher or omniscient power. The speaker asserts that "Too much is / asked. Nothing is coming back the way it was" (ll. 76–77), and thus notes the departure of this present time from that which has come before, making these "answerings" impossible. The juxtaposition of "too much" with "nothing" seems to act as a microcosm for the current state of erosion and destruction, as humanity asks "too much" of the natural world and is faced with the inevitability of "nothing" in return. All one can do, in such a case, is "wait for the next hem, next bride" (l. 78) of the waves to transform the present perception, the "frequency" one inhabits now.

The language of the poem is broken up as it continues where fragments of sentences replace full ones. The linear continuation of time follows this as things begin to merge into different times, such as "two vultures feeding on a pelican. Later, claws and beak / float in the brack" (ll. 33–34). The two states of recent death and "picked-clean," itemized "claws and beak" are juxtaposed as though part of the same observed image. Time speeds up as the erosion of the landscape, the "unnatural causes" of human destruction of the environment, distorts the land physically and temporally, and this sense of order and structure is lost forever. Instead of Whitman's timeless creation of like-minded future beings outside time in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," here Graham offers a nightmarish realization of the erasure of existence as the certainty of a future is

thrown into doubt. Whitman's transcendental expansiveness is replaced by an urgency necessitated by the decay and destruction of the contemporary climate emergency in which Graham's speaker finds herself.

This urgency heightens at the poem's end as a series of short sentences interrupt each other:

> . . . This hand, this
> sugar-stalk. The cane-fields in the back of us,
> the length of tubefish back there too. And
> if I write my name. And how mist rounds the headland
> till the sea
> is gone. (ll. 67–72)

The speaker offers a kind of answering here as the "tubefish" reappears, yet it is referred to in a fragmented sentence that offers no new information or contemplation but merely recalls the fish and the speaker's observation of it. The forward motion resists this "answering" or conversation between past and present, and instead continues to build the pace through the poem. The human observation of that which exists on the shoreline is cut off as soon as the eye moves on, and Graham shows the limits of perception through this.

The significance of the individual human, the "name" by which the speaker marks her identity, is left in a fragmented sentence, immediately eclipsed by "mist," which creates the illusion that "the sea / is gone." Again, this limit of perception looks forward to the inevitable end of this scene, as the individuality of the speaker is lost amidst the sense of time running out. The autonomy and significance of this speaker is questioned through the poem, leading on from the opening claim that "I am a frequency."

The final line cements the irrevocable change and decay that haunts the poem as the speaker looks back on her own journey along the shoreline:

> . . . I can see through the trees,
> through the cane grove, palm grove, out far enough into
> the clearing where
> the spine of the picked-clean story shines. (ll. 80–83)

As in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Graham here condenses present and future into one perception, using her identity as a "frequency" to elucidate this inevitable future scene which imprints itself onto the present. The poem ends on a positive note of perception, as the speaker can see "far enough" to observe something of significance. However, this strength of perception is

framed by the effort it takes to see and the barriers that impede this perception. Instead of the jubilant celebration of life and futurity that Whitman finds in such an identity, Graham's experience of this prophetic vision is rooted in decay and fragmentation. The "spine" of the beginning of the poem, which was presented as the core of existence, here turns to the corpse of a story erased. What story this may be, whether that of the individual speaker, humanity as a whole, or any one of the poem's characters is unclear, as the poem continues to refuse to draw these perceptions and sightings into a wider image. Instead of a celebration of universality, Graham's vision of the future is one of erosion and decay, of destruction and the end of this limited human perception.

The limits of language, perception, and expression continue to form the core of Graham's engagement with Whitman in "Dusk Shore Prayer." Here, too, human perception is fragile, pared down to the monosyllabic "*I am*" (l. 21), and though still somewhat ambiguously communal in the use of "one" (l. 19), the speaker's expression of the "revelation" (l. 1) found on the shoreline remains limited by the waning sunlight which obscures the path.

"Dusk Shore Prayer" is awash with metaphors of writing and speech, mirroring the beginning of "As I Ebb'd," "where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok, / Where they rustle up hoarse and sibilant, / Where the fierce old mother endlessly cries for her castaways" (AIE, ll. 3–5). Graham's poem answers this sibilant fluviality with "The under-shadowed paisleys scripting" (l. 2) the waves and the "golden sentences" (l. 7) of sunlight "writ on clearest moving waters" (l. 7). The speaker clarifies, however, that these attempts to script the shoreline are "meaningless . . ." (l. 8) and remain "on (not *in*) the moving of the / waters" (ll. 8–9). The urgency of the italicized "*in*" here notes this distinction between the sunlight's immersion within the waves and the limits of human perception that sees sunlight only atop them. Instead of Whitman's assurance and assumption of ebbing "with the ocean" (AIE l. 1), Graham's speaker constantly grapples with her inability to fully express or perceive the shoreline before her.

The following section further illustrates this barring of human perception from the full reality of the waves through Graham's use of disruptive punctuation:

(which feels tugged)(the rows of scripting
[even though it's a trick] adamant with
self-unfolding)(wanting the eye to catch and take
dominant final-hold, feel the thickest rope of
waterlipped
scripting (ll. 10–15)

Each parenthesis cuts the meaning of the phrase away from the rest of

the sentence. While the lack of space between each parenthetical phrase at first glance seems to reflect the voluminous swell of wave upon wave, this juxtaposition of closed bracket and open bracket merely solidifies the boundary between what we see and what is there. The square brackets within the parentheses add an extra layer of disassociation between human eyes and the interplay of sunlight on (but not in) waves.

As the poem draws towards a conclusion, the echoes of speech and writing intensify, as the "waterlipped / scripting" flow over the desire "to be a producing of a thing that speaks [to whom / one does not know, but a true speech])" (ll. 16–17) and the speaker seeks:

> . . . to believe this truly,
> not in metaphor—
> to put it in the blank in which one *sees*,
> and then into the blank in which one *is*,
> to separate *I am* from *I have being* from *I am*
> *apart*. And not to want to *be*. And never to be
> emptied by the wound of meaning.
> The gash of likeness. The stump interpretation.
> Spelled from the living world . . . (ll. 17–25)

The possibility of wholeness—believing, seeing, being, having being—is continually swept away from the speaker through the italics that separate this Platonic ideal from the reality. The belief in these absolutes is only hypothetical, a "wanting" (l. 12) which is placed far away from this section to emphasize the gulf between reality and ideal. The desire to "believe this truly" is curbed by the distinction "not in metaphor," as seeing and being are desired to fill "the blank," a reality in which the speaker wrestles with "the wound of meaning. / The gash of likeness. The stump interpretation." Human perception here becomes that which limits us: the limits of language and expression of what it is *to be* become that which bar us from what *is*. Spiegelman aptly summarizes this when he notes that in the poem Graham "wants to catch and take hold of what she knows she cannot just as she realizes the impossibility of her analogous wish: 'to believe this truly, / not in metaphor.'"[42]

⋆

Though varied between the celebratory tone of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and the gloomy, world-weary tone of "As I Ebb'd," Whitman's water poetry presents a mystic figure, positioned at the center of a Universal Being, and assured of his authority to speak over this universal experience as one of many, in communion with the divine. Whitman wrote "at the cultural moment when modern envi-

ronmentalism emerged" as part of a radical transcendental movement which instigated "a shift . . . from viewing wild nature as merely a valuable resource . . . toward a conception of wilderness as an end in its own right."[43]

The evolution of this shift towards an ecopoetic consideration of the natural world is clear in Graham's poetry. Whitman's continued influence on her work more than a hundred years after his death and the continued echoes and answers of his poems within hers emphasize the importance of Whitman's poetry both for Graham and within the contemporary ecopoetic movement more broadly. While Whitman presented an expansionist celebration of the world around him (particularly in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry") typical of his era, it is clear that the natural world was not a mere resource to fuel this expansion, but rather part of the continuation of his identity within the Universal Being. Whitman wrote of his own poetry that:

> Its analogy is *the Ocean*. Its verses are the liquid, billowy waves, ever rising and falling, perhaps sunny and smooth, perhaps wild with storm, always moving, always alike in their nature as rolling waves, but hardly any two exactly alike in size or measure (meter), never having the sense of something finished and fixed, always suggesting something beyond.[44]

Water flows through Whitman's poems both physically—in their fluid, expansive construction across the page—and conceptually in the transcendentalist reach towards "something beyond" the isolation of an individual self. This interconnectedness of all things within and dependent upon water sows the seeds for the contemporary ecocritical movement, which also sees the natural world and water within it as "never having the sense of something finished or fixed." Graham translates these ideas around the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature/water into the reality of the climate crisis, in which Whitman's assurance of the future is quelled by the shrinking inhabitable world. As Whitman presents an environmentally focused voice for the expansionist mindset of his generation, so too Graham captures the ecopoetic realization of the limits of that expansion within the current context.

Graham offers a perspective informed by the late-stage climate catastrophe that moves away from the centralization of human experience. Graham's poetry in part echoes Whitman's mysticism, as her speaker is positioned as a "frequency" through which "current flies," and she acknowledges her placelessness as she too is "held in solution." Instead of claiming her own place in eternity "forever," Graham observes this interconnection between nature and humanity facilitated by water as it lies before her in the moment.

The sense of placelessness, of water that "closes up / again" and "rebe-

come[s]" after a human "disturbance," is met with a disassociation from the human sense of importance and value, as we are mere "frequencies" through which the natural world may pass, but we do not hold power over it, nor over eternity as Whitman asserts. Though the seeds of Whitman's American, expansive poetry may begin to bloom in Graham's ecopoetry, they are clipped by her acknowledgement of the reality of the climate disaster, which questions the continuity of any eternity in the face of such destruction and erasure of life and can speak only from the assurance of the here and now.

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Notes

1 See J. P. O'Malley's "Interview: Jorie Graham's Poetry," *The Spectator* (June 22, 2012), spectator.co.uk/article/interview-jorie-graham-s-poetry/, in which Graham notes that "Poetry's job is, among other things, to make resistance to emotional oversimplification possible. 'Do I contradict myself,' says Whitman, 'very well then, I contradict myself.'" See also Thomas Gardner's interview with Graham in which she discusses "The desire to create one's self…Whitman trying to find a body," and "that motion towards the opposite in order to complete oneself and forge a soul"; Thomas Gardner, "Jorie Graham: The Art of Poetry No. 85," *Paris Review* 165 (Spring 2003), 53-97.

2 Brian Henry, "Exquisite Disjunctions, Exquisite Arrangements: Jorie Graham's 'Strangeness of Strategy,'" *The Antioch Review* 56, no. 3 (Summer 1998), 281–288.

3 Nick Selby, "Prometheus Unbound: Touching Books in Jorie Graham's Swarm and Susan Howe's 'Scattering as Behaviour Toward Risk," in Michael Hinds and Stephen Matterson, eds., *Rebound: The American Poetry Book* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 191.

4 Graham, speaking to Katy Waldman in an interview for *The New Yorker*, articulates her ideas surrounding the tension between individual perception and communality in her poems: "In working to expand, or explore, the traditional lyric speaker, that individual subjectivity, I sometimes felt as if I had access to a collective subjectivity. . . One might once have called this "the chorus"—something the polis speaks. The chorus may at times be the ancestors, or the future, the as-yet unborn, watching us. I feel them pressing with incredible urgency. . . How plural are we? I'm not that persuaded by notions such as hive mind or the singularity. I'm interested in accountability. . . Stepping into her historical moment, any living poet's responsibility is to speak for the human to that brief moment." Graham here outlines her focus on the "accountability" of poetry to speak to the "brief moment" of the present it

occupies, refusing to claim a future from those who may inhabit it but undoubtedly aware of the "urgency" of these future generations whose existence relies on our actions in the present time. Katy Waldman, "Jorie Graham Takes the Long View," *The New Yorker* (January 1, 2023), newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/jorie-graham-takes-the-long-view.

5 See M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004) and Christine Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).

6 Here, I follow David Borthwick, who notes that "[p]lace offers a solace and grounding for many ecopoets, a site for digging in, gaining insights from which to see a wider connection to a shared world. Others take a more global view, wrestling with wider perspectives and other kinds of connection . . . the knowledge we cannot ignore: that the local is the global, too" ("Introduction," in David Knowles and Sharon Blackie, eds. *Entanglements: New Ecopoetry* [Isle of Lewis: Two Ravens Press, 2012], xix).

7 Jorie Graham, "Introduction," in Jorie Graham, ed., *Earth Took of Earth* (New York: Ecco, 1996).

8 Graham, "Introduction."

9 See, for example, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, in which water pollution caused large health risks, particularly in children, and corroded water pipes, which led to high-risk levels of lead in the town's drinking supply. See also Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, "Introduction: Toward a Hydrological Turn?," in Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, eds., *Thinking with Water* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2013), who argue that "water has a particularly intimate relationship with political and social power" (6). Chen et al. point to "The construction of the Sardar Sarovar mega-dam in India's Narmada Valley," which "has displaced and disenfranchised approximately half a million people. . . In spite of discourses promising a fair distribution of benefits, the imposition of managerial control over the Narmada River had brought more water (and, therefore economic wealth) to already privileged constituencies, while radically dispossessing the mostly tribal populations of the region" (6).

10 Ed Folsom, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), xvii.

11 Jorie Graham, "from Walt Whitman's Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," *Materialism* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993), 108.

12 David Baker, "The Push of Reading," *The Kenyon Review* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1994), 162; Jorie Graham, "In the Hotel," *Materialism* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993), 57–58, ll. 64–65.

13 Baker, "The Push of Reading," 162.

14 Selby, 189, 191.

15 Edward Byrne, "Review: Jorie Graham *Never*," *Valparaiso Poetry Review* 2 (Spring/Summer 2024), valpo.edu/vpr/byrnereviewgraham.html.

16 Jorie Graham, "Prayer," in Jorie Graham, *Never* (New York: Ecco, 2002), 3, ll. 1–6. All further references to this poem are to this edition, and line numbers will be indicated after the text in brackets.

17 Gardner, "Jorie Graham, The Art of Poetry No. 85," 165.

18 Jorie Graham, "The Wake Off the Ferry," in *Runaway* (Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 2020), 81, l. 25. All further references to this poem are to this edition, and line numbers will be indicated after the text in brackets.

19 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961; orig. pub. 1908), 2:71; available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.waltwhitmanarchive.org), Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), *Specimen Days*, 1:16, 183.

20 Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," *Leaves of Grass* (David McKay: Philadelphia, PA, 1891–1892), 129, available on the *Whitman Archive*.

21 King James. Paul is referring here to the meeting of God and human, in the trans-corporeal shift of the soul into the afterlife, in which human understandings of God, now seen "darkly," will become clear.

22 Killingsworth suggests that "[r]ather than saying that the poem implies a transcendence of time, it might be better to call it a rejection of temporal limits or a denial of history. In this sense, the poem allows for the kind of spatially situated view of experience that modern environmentalists and nature mystics long for in their concepts of conservation and protection, a view of place elevated above the imposition of a transcendent concept of human progress that values development and human evolution over the sanctity of the land" (*Walt Whitman and the Earth*, 129).

23 Dawid Juraszek, "Clustering of cognitive biases in Walt Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,'" *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 48 no. 4 (2023), 613.

24 Juraszek, 613.

25 Testament to this fact is shown in the building of Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, which made it impossible for the future Americans Whitman imagines to experience this same image with him from the ferry.

26 "For thou has possessed my reins: thou has covered me in my mother's womb. . . My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them" (Psalm 139: 13–16, King James Version).

27 These lines are reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's last line "I could not see to see—" in "I heard a fly buzz—when I died—," which narrates the point at which death overcomes the senses and the speaker's perception of the room is suddenly beyond her reach. Graham uses this failure of human perception to highlight the expansiveness of water. Emily Dickinson, #465, in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 224, l. 16.

28 Huck Gutman, "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopaedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), *Whitman Archive*.

29 Gerhardt, 126.

30 Jeffrey Yang argues that "Whitman viewed the sea as both cradle and grave," which is evident in the poem as the speaker presents himself as both a child of the "fierce old mother" and describes the process of his individual death in order to begin the lifecycle again. See Jeffrey Yang, "Introduction: Apologia for the Sea," in Jeffrey Yang, ed., *The Sea is a Continual Miracle: Sea Poems and Other Writings by Walt Whitman* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2017), xxxv.

31 Gerhardt, 128.

32 Gerhardt, 125.

33 Gerhardt, 129.

34 Gerhardt, 129.

35 Gerhardt, 130.

36 Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 4.

37 Éric Athenot and Olivier Brossard, eds., *Walt Whitman Hom(m)age 2005/1855* (New York: Turtle Point Press, 2005).

38 Jorie Graham, "Dusk Shore Prayer," in *Never*, 31, l. 1. All further references to this poem are to this edition.

39 Willard Spiegelman, "Review: Repetition and Singularity," *The Kenyon Review* 25 (2003), 168.

40 Byrne, "Review: Jorie Graham *Never*."

41 Jorie Graham, "Ebbtide," in *Never*, 36, ll. 1–3. All further references to this poem are to this edition, and line numbers will be indicated after the text in brackets.

42 Spiegelman, 165.

43 Gerhardt, 4.

44 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961; orig. pub. 1906), 1:414–415; available on the *Whitman Archive*.