

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: ECOLOGICAL MUSIC: OBJECT-ORIENTED
PERSPECTIVES IN TWENTY-FIRST-
CENTURY AMERICAN MUSIC

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How can music bring about ecological awareness? What does music have to do with coexistence? These are pressing questions for the field of ecomusicology: the study of music, culture, sound, and nature in a period of environmental crisis. This dissertation addresses those questions by investigating how twenty-first-century American concert music engages with contemporary environmental concerns. Drawing on American philosopher Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and the scholarship of literary theorist and ecophilosopher Timothy Morton as frameworks for analysis, three case studies analyze environmentally-oriented music by major American composers. Through OOO, the unexamined ontological assumptions underlying central topics and themes in ecomusicology, including nature, the Anthropocene, environment, nonhumans, and place are explored. This dissertation argues that by applying the principles of OOO, ecocritical music studies can reveal how music does

more than reflect or represent environmental concerns: music can reconfigure ideas of coexistence and the realities of ecological crises in surprising ways.

The first chapter examines how Sarah Kirkland Snider's *Mass for the Endangered* (2018) stylizes twenty-first-century environmental concerns according to the aesthetics of what Morton calls *dark ecology*, and suggests that music is ontologically deep, an idea that has profound ecological implications for interpretive musical analysis. The second chapter applies Morton's object-oriented conception of the sublime to an analysis of Caroline Shaw's *The Evergreen* (2020) and investigates how human-nonhuman relations manifest in and through musical experience. This study proposes that musical experience takes the form of coexistence and reveals how central topics in musical aesthetics can be re-conceptualized through the lens of OOO for the benefit of ecocritical endeavors. The third chapter examines the significance of place in relation to John Luther Adams's philosophy of music. Through analysis of his writings, this study provides new insight into Adams's creative work by revealing how the ideas that guide it are fundamentally object-oriented.

This dissertation represents the first sustained study of Morton's influential work within a musicological context, and the first substantial contribution to an object-oriented ecomusicology. More broadly, this dissertation examines what it means for music to be ecological, arguing for an understanding of music as a form of coexistence, and contributes to scholarship in ecomusicology and the environmental humanities.

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the twenty-first century, a growing number of musicians and composers have turned their attention to contemporary environmental concerns for inspiration. Many contemporary musical works urge listeners to reflect on their own place within a period of anthropogenic environmental crises, or what literary theorist and ecophilosopher Timothy Morton has more explicitly called an age of mass extinction.¹ For musicologists, understanding how music, music-making, and listening relates to environmental crises is an increasingly pressing concern.²

American composer John Luther Adams (b. 1953) has emerged as a leading figure among composers whose music engages with twenty-first-century environmental issues. Adams's works composed for outdoor settings, like *Inuksuit* (2009) or *Sila: The Breath of the World* (2014), ask listeners to listen more deeply to the world around them, while his Pulitzer-prize winning orchestral work *Become Ocean* (2013) encourages listeners to reflect on the fate of humanity in the face of environmental collapse. American composers Sarah Kirkland Snider (b. 1973) and Caroline Shaw (b. 1982) also draw inspiration for their work from those same issues. Snider's *Mass for the Endangered* (2018) poignantly reflects the fragility of nonhuman life in the hands of human beings and Shaw's string quartet *The Evergreen* (2020) invites contemplation about what it means to coexist with a "non-sentient" thing. These environmentally-oriented works are

¹ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (The MIT Press, 2019), 5–8.

² Aaron S. Allen and Jeff Todd Titon, eds. *Sounds, Ecologies, Musics* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

emblematic of a larger shift toward engagement with environmental concerns in contemporary American music-making.³

In this dissertation I examine what twenty-first-century music by American composers has to say about the biosphere that we inhabit. I call this music *ecological music*, a term I use to refer to music that inspires ecological awareness. Specifically, I show how the three composers above have grappled with contemporary environmental issues through their music, how twenty-first-century environmental concerns shape that music, and how listeners may hear that music alongside growing concerns about the impact of anthropogenic effects on the planet. Although scholars in the field known as ecomusicology have addressed questions of music, nature, and environment for over two decades now, ontological assumptions surrounding those topics remain unexamined, a gap that limits the potential of ecomusicology to theorize the role of music, sound, and listening in relation to those topics.⁴

Understanding ecological music in ecological ways—specifically in ways that align with contemporary scholarly commitments within the environmental humanities, where the focus is

³ This shift is evident from works that engage in some way with environmental concerns by prominent twenty-first-century American composers, including but not limited to: Mason Bates, *Liquid Interface* (2007) and *Alternative Energy* (2012); Steve Heitzeg, *Ecology Symphony* (2010); Steven Mackey, *Urban Ocean* (2013); Ash Fure, *The Force of Things* (2014); Sean Shepherd, *Melt* (2018) and *Sprout* (2021); Julia Wolfe, *unEarth* (2023); Lei Liang, *Hearing Icescapes* (2023); Gabriella Smith, *Lost Coast* (2023); and Christopher Stark, *Fire Ecologies* (2025). This shift is further reflected in U.S.-based ensembles that have adopted environmental-themed programs or initiatives and programs that advocate for environmentally-oriented music-making in general. A few representative examples include the Unheard-of ensemble's "Cultural Ecologies" project; the Experiential Orchestra's "Toward the Sea" program; the Tesla Quartet's "Rising Tides" program; the EcoVoice Project's New Earth Ensemble; and Gabriela Lena Frank's "Composing Earth" program at her own academy, which promotes "eco-citizenship." Collectively, these works and initiatives indicate a turn within the sphere of contemporary classical music-making towards environmental concerns. "Cultural Ecologies," Unheard-of Ensemble, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.unheard-ofensemble.com/cultural-ecologies>; "Toward the Sea," Experiential Orchestra, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.experientialorchestra.com/calendar/toward-the-sea>; "Climate Change," Tesla Quartet, accessed December 31, <https://www.teslaquartet.com/climate-change>; "New Eco Era," EcoVoice Project, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://ecovoiceproject.org/nee>; "Composing Earth," Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.glfcam.com/composing-earth>.

⁴ I use the term "ecomusicology" to refer to the field, scholarship within that field, and ecocritical music studies more generally.

on investigating ecological or ecocentric approaches—means adopting frameworks that reject anthropocentrism, or the idea that humans and only humans have special access to reality. I argue that by applying the principles of philosopher Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO, pronounced “triple O”), ecocritical music studies can subvert anthropocentric assumptions about reality and reveal how music does more than merely reflect or represent environmental concerns. From an object-oriented perspective, music reconfigures ideas of coexistence and the realities of ecological crises in surprising ways.⁵

I return to OOO in depth below, but briefly: OOO views all things, human and nonhuman alike, as equally real and existing independently of human perception. It provides a radically non-anthropocentric framework that compels scholars to reconceptualize phenomena like global warming, the Anthropocene, and coexistence in ways that are not strictly human-centered. My theoretical and analytical approach to ecological music adheres to OOO for this reason. Despite OOO’s influence in several disparate fields since its formal emergence in April 2007, Harman recently wrote that “OOO is currently more developed as a theory than it is as a method.”⁶ I adopt OOO as both a theoretical framework and a method for thinking ecologically about music.

⁵ Other than Harman himself, central OOO figures include Morton, whose work connects OOO to contemporary environmental concerns, the film and media studies scholar Ian Bogost, and the philosopher Levi Bryant. See Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Open Humanities Press, 2013); Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Open Humanities Press, 2011).

Harman responds to the most formidable critics of OOO in Graham Harman *Skirmishes: With Friends, Enemies, and Neutrals* (Punctum Books, 2020).

⁶ Graham Harman and Christopher Witmore, *Objects Untimely: Object-Oriented Philosophy and Archaeology* (Polity, 2023), 160.

Regarding OOO’s emergence: The Speculative Realism conference at Goldsmiths in London marks the birth of the Speculative Realism movement, which consisted of four philosophers—Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Ian Hamilton Grant—all of whom rejected correlationism (the Kantian notion that human beings can never access reality apart from human thought) for different reasons. By the early 2010s, OOO became a recognizable philosophical movement. It has since influenced scholars in philosophy, aesthetics, ecocriticism and environmental philosophy, media studies, game studies, architecture, and literary and cultural studies.

Morton asserts that “human beings are now living through an extended and urgent introduction to OOO, whether they like it or not, whenever they confront phenomena such as global warming and the uncanny resemblances between lifeforms.”⁷ Although widely recognized in other areas of the environmental humanities, Morton’s influential work, which draws extensively on OOO, has yet to find its way into (eco)musicological studies in any rigorous sense.⁸ Morton’s work consistently demonstrates the significant value of object-oriented thought within ecocritical studies and the environmental humanities broadly conceived. With respect to the theoretical intervention that this project represents, my aim is twofold: to illustrate how OOO has influenced Morton’s work and to clarify how both OOO and that work can influence music studies in an age of environmental crises.

At its core, then, this dissertation examines three questions: How has American music since the turn of the twenty-first century handled contemporary environmental concerns? In what ways can OOO provide a framework for understanding this music? And how might that framework reshape the methods and priorities of ecocritical music studies?

This dissertation comprises three case studies. In the first, I explain how Snider’s *Mass for the Endangered* does more than lament contemporary ecological crises; it shows how musical works can reflect the reality of the Anthropocene through the aesthetics of what Morton calls *dark ecology*. In the second, I borrow Morton’s understanding of an object-oriented sublime to analyze Shaw’s string quartet *The Evergreen* and show how that work offers a model for understanding musical experience as a form of coexistence. In the third, I demonstrate that John Luther Adams’s philosophy of music, which centers on an idea of place, is most accurately

⁷ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 68.

⁸ Greg Garrard called Morton “probably the most influential theorist of ecocriticism today”: Greg Garrard, “Introduction” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

understood as fundamentally object-oriented; that an object-oriented understanding of place can be productively generalized to all musical experience, and that such an understanding offers a novel framework for examining music as a source for ecological thinking.

By focusing on a relatively narrow set of works (in this case, music by U.S.-based composers working in the Western classical tradition), I wish to establish a coherent framework within which meaningful connections between my case studies can be made. This music lends itself to exploring some of the implications of OOO for ecocritical music studies for two reasons. As discussed below and throughout this project, OOO's theory of art is grounded in the idea that art is *de-literalization* or *non-literal experience*. Contemporary classical music necessarily participates in the history of Western classical music and therefore provides a fruitful landscape for exploring the implications of that idea. (That being said, it must be pointed out now that the idea is not exclusive to anything that might be called "art music" but is generalizable to all music in some way.) The other reason is that environmental art in the United States functions as a critical cultural response to a certain kind of political apathy surrounding environmental issues, to which the U.S.-based composers here remain unsympathetic, a difference that raises the stakes on examining their music through an ecocritical lens. My hope is that the object-oriented approach I adopt for each of the three studies here resonates beyond that scope and may be taken up in scholarship on music from other traditions, histories, and cultures. I hope readers will take this project as a starting point to consider how the aspects of OOO that I highlight may be applied in other contexts and in studies of other music.

In each chapter I engage OOO perspectives on topics and concepts that are central to ecocritical music studies, including the Anthropocene, nature, environment, place, global warming, and ecology. Ultimately, I argue that object-oriented thought is needed within music

studies to make sense of how music and music-making relate to contemporary environmental issues. My argument involves a simple inversion: Rather than assume that the importance of ecological music is reducible to what that music represents or evokes, I treat musical works as objects (defined below), that draw listeners into non-literal encounters with the reality of twenty-first-century ecological thinking, encounters that ultimately disclose something of the true nature of twenty-first-century environmental issues.

This dissertation is the first major contribution to the development of an object-oriented ecomusicology and the second substantial contribution to the development of an object-oriented musicology.⁹ I describe this project as ecomusicological for two reasons: first, because it involves the study of music, culture, sound, and nature in a period of environmental crises, and second, because it treats human and nonhuman entities as equally real and focuses on how those entities interrelate in ways that can be called ecologically aware.

Ecomusicology

Ecomusicology is not a discipline but a transdisciplinary field, subject, or conversation.¹⁰ Jeff Todd Titon's definition of ecomusicology is widely accepted: "the study of music, culture, sound

⁹ Eric Taxier was the first to bring OOO into contact with musicological topics and his overview is the clearest point of entry: Eric Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology: Some Implications of Graham Harman's Philosophy for Music Theory, History, and Criticism" (PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2020).

¹⁰ Ecomusicologists are obviously not the first to think about music and how it relates to ideas of nature or environment. Relationships between music and nature have been considered since Ancient Greece. The use of the term spread because, according to Mark Pedelty, "it is a fairly obvious appellation for environmentally focused musical research." This description is comparable to Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism: "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Timothy Cooley, Aaron S. Allen, Ruth Hellner, Mark Pedelty, Denise Von Glahn, Jeff Todd Titon, and Jennifer C. Post, "Call and Response: SEM President's Roundtable 2018, 'Humanities' Responses to the Anthropocene," *Ethnomusicology* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2020), 310 and Cheryll Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

and nature in a period of environmental crisis[es].”¹¹ What is the current state of ecomusicology? Five scholars recently published a comprehensive review of the field.¹² Central concerns and themes in ecomusicological scholarship include depictions and representations of nature in music; music and environmental degradation; nature and culture; the role of “nature music” in scholarship; music and ecology, and the Anthropocene. Despite this range of topics, ecomusicology remains undertheorized with respect to fundamental ontological questions. In this section I survey the major trajectories of ecomusicology in relation to that gap.

The following review highlights ecomusicological scholarship that is most relevant to this project and therefore brackets important conversations and approaches. The scope here is limited primarily to English-language scholarship produced in Anglo-American music studies which focuses on contemporary Western art music as its primary repertoire. Ecomusicology encompasses a much wider range of practices, epistemologies, and geographies, however, including work rooted in traditional ecological knowledge (Indigenous knowledge systems), non-Western musical traditions, and diverse disciplinary intersections extending beyond music and sound studies.

While ecomusicology has grown considerably in the last two decades, its growth has outpaced contemplation on the ontological assumptions underlying its various approaches. It remains the case that no study has systematically applied a philosophical framework to examine how music’s ecological significance might be understood. This dissertation addresses that gap by employing OOO as a critical lens through which to analyze contemporary Western art music.

¹¹ Jeff Todd Titon, “The Nature of Ecomusicology,” *Música e Cultura* 8, no. 1 (2013), 8. The plural, I believe, is more accurate, as it reflects the variety of problems that arise as a result of environmental degradation in different parts of the world.

¹² Mark Pedelty, Aaron S. Allen, Chiao-Wen Chiang, Rebecca Dirksen, and Tyler Kinnear, “Ecomusicology: Tributaries and Distributaries of an Integrative Field,” *Music Research Annual* 3 (2022): 1–36.

Without that inquiry, ecomusicology risks remaining at a level of analysis that may illuminate how music relates to nature, environment, and place, or environmental issues but fails to take into account the deeper assumptions that make those concepts and connections possible.

The pianist Malcolm Troup was likely the first to use the term ecomusicology in 1972, but it was Alexander Rehding who, in 2002, first suggested to Anglo-American musicologists that the study of music and nature might provide new questions regarding musical aesthetics, and observed that while the cultural study of nature had become a burgeoning industry in other humanistic disciplines, it had hardly hit musicology.¹³ (Indeed, before the twenty-first century there are very few musicological studies directly engaged with the topics of music and nature or music and the environment.¹⁴) Ecomusicological scholarship quickly established the premise that music can be meaningfully studied in relation to nature and the environment. Yet that initial wave (if it can be called that) of scholarship was primarily concerned with illustrating that music is ecologically relevant, leaving fundamental questions about the nature and status of those relationships largely unexamined.

As the field took shape, ecomusicological scholarship, although varied in its approaches, began to organize itself around two distinct orientations. Scholarship in ecomusicology can be helpfully divided into two categories: *practical* and *poetic*.¹⁵ The term *practical* refers to scholarship that provides “political understanding for sound and music in relation to

¹³ Malcolm Troup, “Masthead Statement,” *Guildhall School of Music and Drama Review* (1972); Alexander Rehding, “Review: Eco-musicology,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127, no. 2 (2002): 305–20.

¹⁴ Ecomusicology has brought many studies under its umbrella. For example, Steven Feld’s book *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Duke University Press, 2012) is now regarded in retrospect as a landmark in the field.

¹⁵ Aaron S. Allen uses these terms to describe different approaches to ecomusicology: Allen, “Ecomusicology Between Poetic and Practical,” in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (De Gruyter, 2016), 648.

environmental and sustainability issues.”¹⁶ Practical ecomusicological studies are, in general, advocacy-based, whether environmentalist or on behalf of ecomusicology itself. Allen’s own essay on the construction of violins with wood from Paneveggio and the consequences of valuing specific material resources for instruments is a notable example of practical ecomusicology.¹⁷ The term *poetic* refers to scholarship that is reflective in that it provides “intellectual understanding for human-nature relationships as mediated by sound and music.”¹⁸ Nancy Guy’s analysis of Taiwanese popular music, which reveals the dramatic transformations in lyrical references to the now toxic Tamsui River, exemplifies the poetic type.¹⁹ This dissertation forges a connection between both categories. By examining the poetic aspects of music, I demonstrate how music can bring about meaningful change in its listeners, the kind that can shape their understanding of coexistence, and how they relate to environmental concerns, something that helps characterize my work as practical, too.

The division between poetic and practical scholarship, however, while conceptually useful, reveals the limits of ecomusicological thought. By centering on either representational

¹⁶ Allen, “Ecomusicology Between Poetic and Practical,” 648.

¹⁷ Allen, “‘Fatto Di Fiemme’: Stradivari’s Violins and the Musical Trees of the Paneveggio,” in *Invaluable Trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660-1830*, eds. Laura Auricchio, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, and Giulia Pacini (Voltaire Foundation, 2012), 301–15. Other scholars have approached organology from an environmentalist standpoint: Michael B. Silvers, “On Cultural and Environmental Sustainability: Rebecas, Pífanos, and the Materials of Musical Instruments in Cariri,” in *Experiências de Pesquisa em Música no Cariri Cearense*, eds. Márcio Mattos Aragão Madeira (Universidade Federal do Cariri, 2016), 97–106; James Edwards, “A Field Report from Okinawa, Japan: Applied Ecomusicology and the 100-Year Kuruchi Forest Project,” *MUSICultures* 45, 1–2 (2018), 136–45, and Chris Gibson, “A Sound Track to Ecological Crisis: Tracing Guitars All the Way Back to the Tree,” *Popular Music* 38, no. 2 (2019), 183–203. All of the above may be regarded as examples of “practical” ecomusicology.

¹⁸ Allen, “Ecomusicology Between Poetic and Practical,” 648.

¹⁹ Nancy Guy, “Flowing Down Taiwan’s Tamsui River: Towards an Ecomusicology of the Environmental Imagination,” *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 2 (2009): 218–48. Other examples include Matthew Riley, “Rustling Reeds and Lofty Pines: Elgar and the Music of Nature,” *19th-Century Music* 26, no. 2 (2002): 155–77; Brooks Toliver, “Eco-ing in the Canyon: Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite* and the Transformation of Wilderness,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, No. 2 (2004): 325–68; Holly Watkins, “The Pastoral After Environmentalism: Nature and Culture in Stephen Albert’s *Symphony: RiverRun*,” *Current Musicology*, 84 (Fall 2007): 7–24.

meaning or political utility, scholarship assumes that the ecological significance of music can be reduced to its effects on human beholders. This assumption becomes increasingly difficult to sustain in light of recent developments in the environmental humanities, most notably the widespread adoption of the Anthropocene as a conceptual framework since the early 2010s. Recognition of humanity as a geological force disrupts anthropocentric assumptions underlying both advocacy-oriented and reflective approaches, demanding new theoretical tools for understanding music in an age of environmental crises.

In recent years, interest in the concept of the Anthropocene has grown within music studies.²⁰ Despite opposition to the adoption of the term for the latest geological epoch, scholars within the environmental humanities find the term and its conceptual implications useful, if not necessary.²¹ Within music studies, Andrew Chung has addressed some of the consequences of contextualizing musical works through the history that the Anthropocene shares with early modern colonialism.²² Jim Sykes has addressed the lack of definition provided to the term Anthropocene within music studies.²³ Sykes refers to “the crisis called the Anthropocene” and argues that music studies suffer from ideas of progress embedded in the normative conception of music history; the crisis mainly involves its promotion of anthropocentrism and human

²⁰ As indicated by the Spring/Summer 2023 issue of *SEM Student News* devoted to the topic “Music and the Anthropocene”: <https://www.semsn.com/191-music-and-the-anthropocene>.

²¹ Morton, “Rejecting the Anthropocene Is a Mistake: Geologists’ Vote is a Terrible Blunder,” *IAI News*, April 9, 2024, <https://iai.tv/articles/rejecting-the-anthropocene-is-a-mistake-auid-2806>.

²² Andrew Chung, “Songs of the New World and the Breath of the Planet at the Orbis Spike, 1610: Toward a Decolonial Musicology of the Anthropocene,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76 no. 1 (2023): 57–112.

²³ “The term ‘Anthropocene,’ so widespread in the academy and now even in popular culture, has been surprisingly under-defined in music studies.” Jim Sykes, “The Anthropocene and Music Studies,” *Ethnomusicology Review* 22, no. 1 (2018): 4–21.

triumphalism.²⁴ As I illustrate in the next section and argue throughout this dissertation, adherence to the principles of OOO help to remedy if not totally bypass those two issues.

Scholars in the environmental humanities have devoted increasing attention to how the Anthropocene forces one to rethink subject-object relationships.²⁵ If culture (humans) and nature (nonhumans) are inextricably intertwined, as Bruno Latour points out in his famous 1991 essay “We Have Never Been Modern,” then it is necessary to find ways to explore how human actions can be thought of as part of nature and vice versa.²⁶ Rehding asserts that we can only make progress past the façades of the “passive, dispassionate concept of nature,” past longstanding binaries like human-non-human, nature-culture, or subject-object, by recasting all things as actors or agents in a vast network, whether they are things or people.²⁷ Michael Silvers recently declared that ecomusicology has been “insufficiently attentive to the non-human.”²⁸

The Anthropocene forces ecomusicology to confront the inadequacy of human-centered paradigms. It has prompted scholars to find new conceptual tools for thinking about agency, relationality, and the status of nonhuman things. The growing prominence of the Anthropocene

²⁴ Sykes, “The Anthropocene and Music Studies,” 7.

²⁵ Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (Open Humanities Press, 2015); Carolyn Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability* (Yale University Press, 2020); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

²⁶ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁷ Rehding, “Music Theory’s Other Nature: Reflections on Gaia, Humans, and Music in the Anthropocene,” *19th-Century Music* 45, no. 1 (2021): 10.

Rehding’s use of the term “actors” is probably meant to evoke actor-network theory (ANT) and the work of Bruno Latour. The most important difference between ANT and OOO is that, for OOO, objects (actors) are not reducible to their relations. Harman has written extensively about Latour: Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (re.press, 2009) and Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (Pluto Press, 2014). One conversation between Harman and Latour appears in Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Peter Erdélyi, *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (Zer0 Books, 2011).

²⁸ Silvers, “Ethnomusicology as Ecomusicology,” *Society for Ethnomusicology Newsletter* 55, no. 1 (2021): 18–20.

as a framework for ecocritical inquiry exposes the limits of existing approaches which continue to privilege a human-world correlate even as they seek to de-stabilize that correlation. That contradiction highlights the need for conceptual tools that move beyond critique of anthropocentrism toward alternative ways of conceiving agency or, to put it more straightforwardly, *how things exist*. It is within this context that ecocentric approaches have gained more attention.

Calls to rethink agency overlap with a broader shift throughout the humanities toward ecological models of thought. Scholars have begun to recognize the need for more ecological or ecocentric approaches. In 2020, Aaron Allen concluded that for ecomusicology, “more could certainly be done to build on ecological work.”²⁹ The term ecology has been applied in a variety of ways in ecomusicology to refer to the general interconnectedness of human and nonhuman things.³⁰ David Ingram has asserted that “music warrants ecocritical study not least because it has become an important way of imagining notions of ecological interconnectedness.”³¹ Mark Pedelty described what ecological music studies might entail: “In order to study music ecologically, it is necessary to consider connections between sound, people, and place.”³² To this list it is now necessary to add nonhuman things.

²⁹ Cooley, et al., “Call and Response,” 306.

³⁰ The ethnomusicologist William Kay Archer first suggested and described an “ecology of music” in 1964. William Kay Archer, “On the Ecology of Music,” *Ethnomusicology* 8, no. 1 (1964): 28–33. Today, Archer’s ecology of music appears somewhat reminiscent of Christopher Small’s idea of *musicking*. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (University of New England, 1998).

³¹ David Ingram, “Editorial,” *Green Letters* 15, no. 1 (2011): 5–7.

³² Pedelty, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and Environment* (Temple University Press, 2012), 12. Pedelty also asserts that “no ecological analysis is complete without consideration of the material world as well,” an assertion worthy of further consideration, especially considering ecocriticism’s recent turn to materiality. By material effects, Pedelty means the effects (e.g., the carbon footprint) of, for instance, musicians performing outdoor concerts. Pedelty, *Ecomusicology*, 10–11. Regarding the “turn to materiality” in ecocriticism, see Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, eds., *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana University Press, 2014).

Ecological models offer a way of moving beyond anthropocentric binaries and re-situating music within networks of relations. Jeff Todd Titon advocates for a more holistic ecological conception of nature as a set of interconnected relationships in what he refers to as a “relational epistemology,” a way of knowing that moves beyond economic rationality and scientific reductionism regarding nature.³³ More recently, Titon has defined *music ecology* as “ecological approaches to human musicking” and Chung has encouraged those in music studies to exercise “appropriate skepticism toward [...] the sentiments of ecological holism.”³⁴ Through OOO, Harman and Morton both dismiss the idea that ecologism equals holism.³⁵ Indeed, resorting to relationality as an ultimate explanatory principle leaves the independent existence of things unexamined and unappreciated, something antithetical to any endeavor that strives to be ecologically aware.

Ecology as a metaphor remains common in ecocritical music studies.³⁶ While Titon defines *music ecology* as “ecological approaches to human musicking,” he also reminds scholars that ecology is the discipline of ecological science and that ecology itself is not an object of

³³ Titon, “The Nature of Ecomusicology,” 8. Titon’s notion of a “relational epistemology” stems from Morton’s idea of ecological thinking without nature: see Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Titon, “Afterword: Ecomusicology and the Problems of Ecology,” *MUSICultures* 45, nos. 1–2 (2018): 255–64; Chung, “Songs of the New World,” 101.

³⁵ Graham Harman, “Unsublime Ecology,” *Flash Art*, September 2, 2019, <https://flash---art.com/article/unsublime-ecology/>; Morton, *Being Ecological*, 46.

³⁶ Several ethnomusicologists whose work engages both Indigenous knowledge and environmental activism have explored how sound and ecological advocacy are interwoven in indigenous or traditional ecological (sometimes environmental) knowledge (often abbreviated TEK) in attempts to help music scholars reconceptualize nature. Ecomusicological examples include: Candice Elanna Steiner, “A Sea of Warriors: Performing an Identity of Resilience and Empowerment in the Face of Climate Change in the Pacific,” *Contemporary Pacific* 27, no. 1 (2015): 147–80; Brian Diettrich, “‘Summoning Breadfruit’ and ‘Opening Seas’: Toward a Performative Ecology in Oceania,” *Ethnomusicology* 62, no. 1 (2018): 1–27; and Olusegun Stephen Titus, “Ecomusicology, Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Degradation in Ibadan, Nigeria,” *African Music: Journal of the International Library of African Music* 11, no. 1 (2019): 72–90.

study.³⁷ Brent Keogh and Ian Collinson helpfully distinguish between *music ecology* and *ecomusicology*, critique the application of the ecology trope to the discourse of cultural diversity and sustainability within music studies, and suggest that those engaged in contemporary *music ecology* must re-evaluate their positions and aims.³⁸

Debates about agency and ecology mark a critical point in ecomusicological scholarship. By emphasizing relations, scholars have opened new ways of conceptualizing music's place in environmental thought. But those approaches remain tied to relational paradigms that assume the primacy of connections over the autonomous existence of entities themselves. Overemphasis on relations and processes means overlooking frameworks that can account for the reality of both human and nonhuman things without reducing them to their interactions, a serious problem if one grants that things are always something deeper than whatever they happen to be doing at any given moment.

There are three recent ecomusicological projects that, like mine, engage exclusively with environmentally-oriented contemporary Western art music. How do these studies differ from my own? Tyler Kinnear takes a reductionist approach and argues that music can effectively communicate nature as a *process*. Music can therefore help to avoid understandings of nature as

³⁷ Titon, "Afterword: Ecomusicology and the Problems of Ecology," *MUSICultures* 45, 1–2 (2018): 255–64.

³⁸ Brent Keogh and Ian Collinson evaluate (ethno)musicology's use of the term and distinguish between *music ecology* and *ecomusicology*. They note that in some cases the terms *music ecology* and *ecomusicology* are used uncritically as synonyms and argue that the two terms should be distinguished from each other: ecomusicology to describe "a certain political consciousness connected to ecocritical approaches to the study of music and sound" and *music ecology* to describe "methodological approaches that suggest music behaves like nature" or approaches that suggest that "music is best understood through reference to the natural environment." Brent Keogh and Ian Collinson, "A Place for Everything, and Everything in its Place—The (Ab)uses of Music Ecology," *MUSICultures* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–15. For example, Sabine Feisst writes: "Musicologists, in particular ethnomusicologists, have analyzed music making through the lens of ecology for several decades. Their scholarship has more recently been classified as ecomusicology (conflating ecology and musicology)." Sabine Feisst, "Introduction: Music and Ecology," *Contemporary Music Review* 35, no. 3 (2016): 293–95.

a commodity for exploitation or as something distinct from humans.³⁹ Elin Kanhov draws on aspects of posthumanist and new materialist thought to examine how contemporary concert music informs and reshapes musical discourses and cultural conceptions of nature.⁴⁰ Kanhov derives her theoretical framework primarily from Deleuze-Guattarian thought and employs a Deleuze-Guattarian approach to all of her case studies. Tore Størvold addresses how musical depictions of nature can (re)shape prevailing attitudes and real-world conduct and argues that musical performances can enact new relationships between humans and their environment.⁴¹ At one point, Størvold suggests ecomusicological studies have, in general, been limited by the premise that music can only represent or mediate already existing ideas about nature, a sentiment that I follow closely here.⁴² The three projects just mentioned demonstrate how contemporary

³⁹ Tyler Kinnear, “Music in Nature, Nature in Music: Sounding the Environment in Contemporary Composition” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2017). Kinnear discusses three twenty-first-century works: Matthew Burtner’s *Iceprints* (2002), Paul Rudy’s *In Lake’ch* (2007) and Carmen Branden’s *Candle Ice* (2014).

⁴⁰ Elin Kanhov, “Encounters Between Music and Nature: A Productive and Transversal Approach to Contemporary Music Analysis” (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2023). Kanhov’s project is posthumanist in that it questions human-centered ways of knowing and being in relation to “seemingly fixed conceptions of nature that appear separate from the domain of culture.” It is new materialist in that it understands nature and culture as entangled material-discursive processes and points to the “inevitable embeddedness of practices such as music” within those processes. Kanhov, “Encounters Between Music and Nature,” 202 and 207. The “material-discursive processes” Kanhov refers to in her project come from a foundational text in new materialist thinking: Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Størvold primarily investigates the origins and directions of Iceland’s nature-music narrative and the conflation of ideas about nature and nation on both the local and global scale that have occurred as a result. Tore Størvold, *Dissonant Landscapes: Music, Nature, and the Performance of Iceland* (Wesleyan University Press, 2023), 128.

⁴² Størvold, *Dissonant Landscapes*, 128.

What interpretative or analytical strategies are needed if, as Størvold suggests, music can “set in motion [the] terms of stimulating ecological understanding”? Størvold, *Dissonant Landscapes*, 139. Størvold takes an interest in the “ecological aesthetics” of composer Anna Thorvaldsdóttir’s music. The atmospheres created by Thorvaldsdóttir’s music, Størvold insists, “afford a musical experience where the activity of listening becomes a means of ‘leaning into’ encompassing affective spaces.” But Størvold retreats from suggesting that such a process translates into ecological understanding or action since, according to him, for that to happen, “we must interpret—that is, we must attempt to make sense of—these atmospheres using language.” Størvold, *Dissonant Landscapes*, 113. Contrary to this position, I will hold that the listener is *already* engaged in ecological understanding and action, prior to any interpretive work. The kind of interpretation Størvold refers to involves a formalist approach to interpretation that situates the listener somewhere outside the musical work. OOO breaks from traditional formalist approaches by understanding the listener and musical work as a compound entity, an aspect of the theory that I discuss at length, as it is especially conducive to ecocritical music studies. Harman, *Art and Objects* (Polity, 2019), 44.

ecomusicology has extended into the realms of posthumanist and materialist theory. But the focus remains on music's mediating function, a premise my work here challenges by interrogating the ontological conditions under which such mediation actually occurs.

Even as ecological thinking has expanded the conceptual horizons of ecomusicology, its work remains tethered to representational or relational models of music to examine its ecological significance. What remains underexplored are the deeper ontological implications of its approaches and assumptions—questions regarding what music and environmental phenomena *are*, not merely how they relate. Despite the growing sophistication of ecomusicological scholarship, few studies interrogate the ontological assumptions underlying their approaches, and none have systematically applied philosophical frameworks to reframe how music's ecological significance might be conceived. It is precisely that gap that this dissertation seeks to redress by adopting OOO as a framework through which to scrutinize key concepts of ecomusicological inquiry. The question is why music scholars, specifically ecomusicologists, should concern themselves with ontological questions more generally. There are at least three important reasons for exploring what OOO has to offer ecomusicology and music studies in general. I flesh out OOO's inner workings in the next section and its broader implications for ecocritical music studies throughout the three case studies.

First, ontological questions are profoundly political. The metaphysics one assumes shapes the ways in which one adopts, understands, and applies the most basic concepts.⁴³ The question of *how* things exist is necessarily a political one and one that must be addressed by any field that deals with topics like global warming and environmental crises. While the ontological status of musical objects remains a contentious topic of debate, the ontological status of environmental

⁴³ I will use the terms metaphysics and ontology interchangeably.

objects remains totally unexamined within the field of (eco)musicology. By compelling one to acknowledge the strange irreducibility of both music and global warming, OOO brings musical experiences and contemporary environmental concerns closer together.

Second, as previously mentioned, OOO abandons anthropocentrism. How so? OOO avoids anthropocentric scaling by initially treating human and nonhuman entities the same way. Ecologically aware scholarship involves thinking and acting ethically and politically on a lot of different scales, not just one.⁴⁴ Incorporating nonhuman things into politics is widely recognized as a necessity within the environment humanities in order to adequately confront the complexities of environmental topics.⁴⁵ The future significance of ecomusicological work in many ways depends on how that work understands the ways in which nonhuman things relate, or fail to relate, with other nonhuman things, not strictly how humans exist in or alongside nonhuman ecosystems.

Third, OOO insists that objects have hidden inaccessible depths. This means that things cannot be reduced to their components, relations, or effects. The Great Barrier Reef, ice sheets in Antarctica, global warming, the Anthropocene—these things cannot be reduced to their effects on human or nonhuman entities. Neither can they be reduced to their constituent elements. From a OOO perspective, because things exist in this irreducible way, they remain forever withheld

⁴⁴ Morton writes: “Ecological awareness is shaking our faith in the anthropocentric idea that there is one scale to rule them all—the human one.” Morton, *Being Ecological*, 22.

⁴⁵ Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism*; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010); Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stephanie Foote, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Environmental Humanities* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

In one essay, Harman concludes that “the reason the future of politics is ecological [...] is that the point where human meets world is not the only point where politics appears, or even the primary one.” Harman, “Malabou’s Political Critique of Speculative Realism,” *Open Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2021): 94–105.

from any kind of direct access. Things may be approached indirectly, however, and music is just one medium that provides indirect access to things.⁴⁶

Next, I present an overview of OOO and introduce the theoretical framework of this dissertation. I focus on detailing the premises from which my analytical work begins. My analytical methods adhere to the basic principles of OOO and their implications. Additional commentary on object-oriented thought appears with varying detail throughout the three main chapters.

Object-Oriented Ontology

OOO first commits to a flat ontology, an intrinsically ecological concept. The term implies that nothing is inherently more real than anything else and differences between things do not necessitate an ontological hierarchy.⁴⁷ If things exist, then those things must exist in the same way. From that position, OOO introduces two basic principles. The first is that reality is not composed of processes, relations, or appearances but of *objects*.⁴⁸ Harman writes: “Individual entities of various different scales (not just tiny quarks and electrons) are the ultimate stuff of the

⁴⁶ In addition to this preliminary list of three reasons, it should be emphasized that, as Harman writes: “There is no way to study sound, or anything else, without operating on the basis of some implicit or explicit ontology. Most such ontologies are literalist in character, and this inevitably entails a degree of poverty (if not outright blindness) in dealing with the duel between any sound-object and its transient or enduring qualities.” Harman, “Moral Superiority as First Philosophy: In Response to Andrew Chung” in *Resonance* 3, no. 2 (2022): 195.

⁴⁷ On that point, OOO rejects *correlationism*, or the belief that things only exist in relation to human minds, language, or knowledge. The correlationist insists one cannot think of *world without humans* or *humans without world*. OOO insists that this is false. Morton calls correlationism “anthropocentrism in philosophical form.” Morton, “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology,” *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (2011): 164.

⁴⁸ It goes against contemporary trends in music studies to view music as an “object” in any sense. Taxier notes that OOO raises several questions: “Is OOO regressive in its attitude toward autonomy? Does it offer anything more to musicology beyond supporting a trendy appeal to non-humans? Is applying the same ontology to different sizes and kinds of things *too* democratic to say anything meaningful about those specific things?” Taxier addresses these concerns one-by-one in his dissertation: Taxier, “Object-Oriented Musicology,” 3–10.

cosmos.”⁴⁹ An object is anything that cannot be reduced downward to its smaller pieces or upward to its relations or effects. Attempts to reduce objects either way entail what Harman calls “undermining” and “overmining,” respectively.⁵⁰ Both strategies constitute knowledge about objects but both fail to account for the reality of those objects which always remains deeper than any form of knowledge. The second basic principle is that objects withdraw from all types of relation. Objects are autonomous from their own parts and appearances as much as their relations with other objects. Objects are both themselves and not-themselves simultaneously.

For OOO, no object ever makes contact with the reality of any other object. Objects only ever encounter the distorted appearances of one another. The appearance of any object is never that object itself but only a translation of it. In any relation, objects themselves remain absent (withdrawn) rather than present. This holds true for relations between inanimate entities, which are concealed from each other no less than from human beings. This means that for any object, reality is only *indirectly* accessible.⁵¹ But what OOO is most concerned with is the tension between objects and their qualities.

The withdrawal of objects from themselves (their parts and appearances) and from other objects leads to an ontological structure of objects that involves two polarities, or two axes of division: the difference between *objects* and their *qualities* and the difference between the *real* (things-in-themselves) and the *sensual*, things that belong to the phenomenal dimension. Those

⁴⁹ Harman, “Brief SR/OOO Tutorial (2010)” in *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Zer0 Books, 2013), 143–150.

⁵⁰ Undermining is exemplified in music studies by musical analysis, however non-literal it may be, while overmining is exemplified by contextualization. In Chapters 1 and 3 I touch on contextual elements. In Chapter 2 I address the failings of non-literal prose for evaluating musical works.

⁵¹ A central thesis of OOO is that causality belongs to the aesthetic dimension. Morton explores this at length in *Realist Magic*. For the more curious reader, see Jon Cogburn, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *The Graham Harman Reader*, eds. Jon Cogburn and Niki Young, (Zer0 Books, 2023), xxii–xxv and then Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” in *The Graham Harman Reader*, 221–40.

two axes form the basis of OOO's fourfold model of objects. It must be repeated that objects (animate or inanimate) remain forever withdrawn not only from human access but from each other, too. Objects already express agency before their relations with other objects as they are always already in tension with themselves, their own qualities.

Not all objects are equally real but they are all equally objects (for this reason, Harman actually calls OOO a "bumpy ontology").⁵² *Real objects* exist whether or not they currently affect anything else. *Sensual objects* exist only in relation to some *real object*.⁵³ The former are derivative of the latter. This does not mean that OOO divides reality into two separate realms, one real and one sensual, but instead that it situates the two axes within a fourfold model of objects in general. Like objects themselves, the properties or *qualities* of objects come in two kinds, *real qualities* and *sensual qualities* (multiple real and sensual qualities can exist with the same object). Real qualities are those qualities which objects need to be themselves. Sensual

⁵² "OOO polarizes the world along the axes of real vs. sensual and object vs. quality, and in this way ends up as a bumpy ontology rather than a flat one." Harman, "Moral Superiority as First Philosophy," 201.

⁵³ Sensual objects are never truly autonomous since one encounters not one sensual object but many all the time.

Sensual objects exist only insofar as they are *intended*. The philosophical concept of intentionality means that one is always conscious of *something*. Intentionality is not exclusive to humans but an ontological feature of objects in general. For OOO, intentionality means *sincerity*, or contact between a real object and a sensual one. Sincerity is the ordinary state of relations or experience. Harman provides an example: "At this very moment I am absorbed or fascinated by the sensual tree, even if my attitude toward it is utterly cynical and manipulative. I do not contain the sensual tree, because this is the role of the unified intention that provides the theater of my sincerity without being identical to it. [...] I expend my energy in taking the tree seriously, whereas the sensual tree cannot return the favor, since it is nothing real." Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 228.

NB: The location of sensual objects is not *inside the mind*, since both the mind and its sensual object are located on the interior of a more encompassing object. In other words, the sensual object Beethoven's Fifth Symphony exists on the interior of the object Beethoven's Fifth Symphony-plus-beholder. Harman writes: "The sensual avatar of any real object is produced *in situ*, by which I mean that it emanates only when the real object combines with another real object to form a new compound object (and all objects are compounds), however brief its lifespan." Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 228. Real objects produce sensual avatars of themselves for other objects *all the time*. Morton evocatively writes that "the aesthetic dimension floats in front of objects, like a group of disturbing clowns in an Expressionist painting or a piece of performance art whose boundaries are nowhere to be seen." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 19.

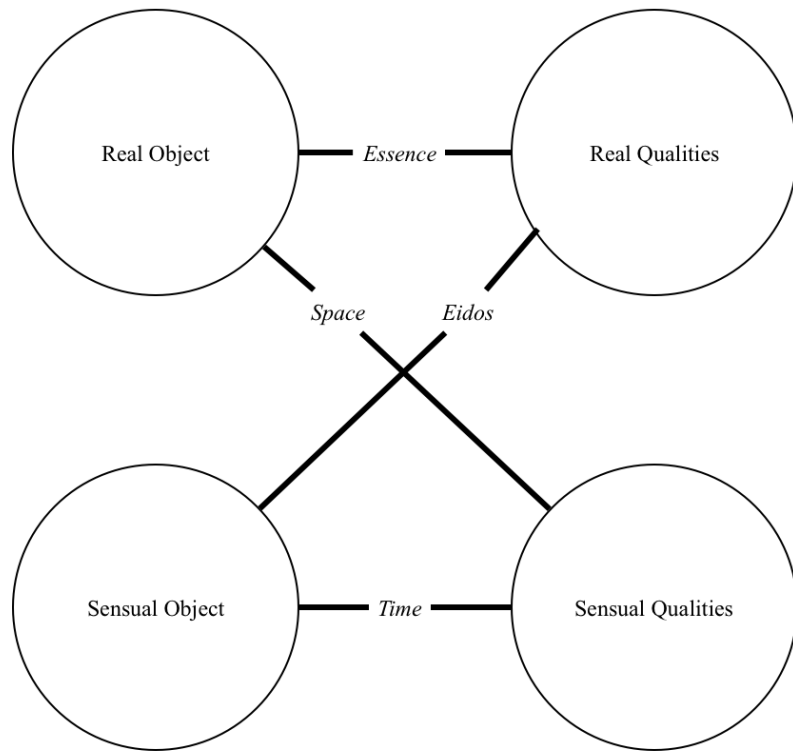
qualities, on the other hand, like sensual objects, exist only in relation to a perceiver. Sensual objects *emanate* sensual qualities.

Those four terms constitute one of Harman's most significant contributions to philosophy: a fourfold structure of objects. Every object is a *quadruple object*. Objects and their qualities are inseparable, yet objects remain irreducible to their qualities. OOO calls object and qualities together *tensions*. A tension is the loose relationship between an object and its qualities. For every object, there is a gap between it and its qualities. "Tension" refers to the fact that an object both has and does not have its qualities, since objects do occasionally exchange their qualities for others. What is of interest throughout all the chapters here is how music involves all four tensions, or how it can allude to them.

With the two polarities above (two kinds of objects and two kinds of qualities) there are four possible object-quality tensions, which Harman names: *time (simulation)*, *space (allure)*, *essence (causation)*, and *eidos (theory)*—see Figure 1 below. The names of the tensions refer to them "per se" while the parenthetical terms refer to where those tensions become "at issue."⁵⁴ I

⁵⁴ This is how Taxier categorizes the tensions. There is no ontological distinction between the names of the tensions "per se" and their names when they become "at issue," as Taxier points out: Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology," 40.

FIGURE 1: The four tensions.



primarily focus on the distinction between *time (simulation)* and *space (allure)* throughout this project, although I sometimes refer to the other two tensions as well. As Harman notes, the interaction of those four tensions “is not the play of four disembodied forces, but of four tensions affecting every object that in some way is.”⁵⁵ A brief explanation of each of the four tensions will clarify their names and signal how they can be productive tools for the study of aesthetics and therefore music studies.

Since sensual objects exist only in relation to a perceiver, a sensual object cannot exist except in tension with its sensual qualities. For OOO, time is something that objects emit. Time occurs on the surface of things, fully within the realm of experience, perception or intellect. Time, as Harman puts it, is “the strife between a sensual object and its sparkling features.”⁵⁶ Generally speaking, a musical object appears to be “in a fast tempo” when it emits a profusion of various sonic qualities, whereas the passage of time appears much slower when a piece of music depends solely on sustaining a single pitch.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, *eidos* is the tension between a sensual object and its real qualities. Experientially *theory*, that tension identifies perceptible objects which appear to unify the hidden features of a deeper reality.

Real objects, unlike sensual objects, exist whether anyone perceives them or not. *Essence* is the tension between a real object and its real qualities.⁵⁸ OOO holds that real qualities no less

⁵⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Zero Books, 2011), 102.

⁵⁶ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 102.

⁵⁷ *Simulation* refers to the fact that “normal perception does not distinguish between objects and their sum total of qualities, despite realizing that many of those qualities are not currently available.” Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Open Court: 2005), 151.

⁵⁸ The tension between a real object and its real qualities produces the “essence” of the object, a term one cannot read without some suspicion. But as Cogburn helpfully points out, for OOO essence “is not a universal, but rather an individual essence belonging to the irreplaceable and irreducible particular.” Cogburn, “Editors’ Introduction,” xx. The true nature (essence) of any object is unknowable, forever withdrawn from any type of relation.

than sensual qualities are shaped by the object to which they belong. It should be noted here that real objects and their real qualities remain withdrawn from any form of access. *Space*, on the other hand, is the tension between a concealed real object and the immediately accessible sensual qualities associated with it. *Space* takes center stage in Chapter 3, where it informs my understanding of place as an object of experience and perception.

Harman equates the perceived tension between any real object and its sensual qualities (*allure*) with metaphor. Allure forms the basis of all art for OOO.⁵⁹ The metaphor *a cypress is like a flame* (sensual object) indicates a cypress (real object) with flame-like qualities (sensual qualities).⁶⁰ The beholder of that metaphor must put in the work to reconcile flame-like qualities with the withdrawn cypress (OOO's theory of art calls this the beholder's *theatrical enactment* of those qualities). The cypress object guides or steers the way in which the beholder understands or experiences the flame-like qualities it leaves behind in its wake. The title of a painting, poem, or piece of music has a similar function. Knowledge about a particular object can inform its beholder as to what qualities that object may possess, or what objects may be represented for those qualities to orbit.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Harman characterizes allure as "the fission of sensual objects, replacing them with real ones." Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 245–46.

⁶⁰ Harman discusses this metaphor at length in Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (Pelican Books, 2018), 66–85.

⁶¹ Harman derives his particular notion of theatricality from the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset: Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 66–73 and 81–85. The beholder does not literally become the cypress in the metaphor, of course. Rather, the beholder's reconciliation of the cypress-object with its flame-like qualities generates a new object: "[M]etaphor does not try to give us thoughts or perceptions about an object, since these would merely give us an external view of the thing in question. What metaphor gives us, instead, is something like the thing in its own right: the infamous thing-in-itself." Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 86. With the metaphor above, that *thing-in-itself* is the beholder-plus-flame-like qualities. It may be said that the beholder also takes on a particular cypress-like mode of being as that new object. Theatricality differs from passive observation in that the beholder must sustain a particular "mode" of being. Any interpretation or analysis of a beholder's theatricality must inevitably fail to capture its reality. My musical analyses aim to inform a beholder's potential role in relation to the work in question, not to summarize a hypothetical or "ideal" listener's involvement with it.

At this point it will be helpful to take a musical example to clarify some of the implications of the points above. Adams's *Become Ocean*, which won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Music, is a celebrated example of twenty-first-century ecological music. For forty-two minutes, three separate large ensembles blend together to portray the slow, ever-shifting immensity of the ocean. From an object-oriented perspective, an analysis limited to discussion of the work's distinguishing harmonic characteristics or rhythmic patterns would only serve to undermine it. Alex Ross points out that the entire score is a palindrome, and that "almost every feature [of the work] seems to have something to do with the number seven and its multiples."⁶² While this knowledge provides insight into Adams's compositional goals, and perhaps lends some credence to statements about the work's underlying complexity, it says little about the art object *Become Ocean* itself, unless its beholder finds themselves engaging those aspects of the work in some non-literal way. To my ear, the palindrome is not a perceptible feature of the work, and any numerical relationships are probably undetectable even to the most attentive listener.

Meanwhile, descriptions of the work's effects on its listeners would only serve to overmine it. In an early review of the first commercial recording of the work, music critics at *NPR* wrote that *Become Ocean* "ushers you in and swallows you up. It's gorgeous, darkly beautiful and ultimately unsettling."⁶³ But while descriptions of a work's effects are certainly

Also worth bearing in mind here: "Such performance [referring to theatricality] does not occur in cases of literal knowledge, since here the object does not disappear from the scene and thus has no need of replacement. What distinguishes aesthetic phenomena from other experience is that the beholder is called upon—assuming we hear the call, that we are at least somewhat convinced by the artwork—to stand in for the missing object and support the qualities that were only half-plausibly assigned to it. A completely plausible assignment would result in literal rather than aesthetic comparison: 'a cornet is like a trumpet,' 'a moth is like a butterfly.'" Harman, *Art and Objects*, 69.

⁶² Alex Ross, "John Luther Adams's *Become Ocean*," *The Rest Is Noise* (blog), July 8, 2013, <https://therestisnoise.com/jlas-become-ocean/>.

⁶³ Tom Huizenga and Anastasia Tsioulcas, "First Listen: John Luther Adams, *Become Ocean*," *NPR*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/09/21/348962229/first-listen-john-luther-adams-become-ocean>.

pertinent to any discussion of that work, over-emphasis or reliance on those descriptions can imply that the work is reducible to those effects, just as an analysis that details the use of a tone row in a twelve-tone work can imply that the work is reducible to that row. In other words, both forms of reduction, at their extremes, work to eliminate the art object called *Become Ocean*, while both forms *together* (for which Harman coins the term *duomining*) in their weaker states do the same thing. I address the question regarding why the term *art* is important below and return to the ecological implications of appreciating objects as withdrawn throughout the rest of the project.

When it comes to getting hold of the reality of that object, then, the two forms of knowledge available (saying what something is made of or what it does) are not particularly helpful. Object-oriented musical analysis depends on indirect approaches, or countermethods (a topic covered in more depth in Chapter 1) to *allude* to the reality of musical objects. This is why OOO, generally speaking, favors allusions and metaphors, although non-literal prose itself does not constitute an indirect approach to the reality of an object (a topic covered in Chapter 2). Ross's description of *Become Ocean* as perhaps "the loveliest apocalypse in musical history" effectively alludes to what he believes is the reality of the work.⁶⁴ The work puts forward an apocalyptic vision of the future that seductively captivates its beholder's attention for the span of forty-two minutes. Justification for that interpretation would involve investigating how that happens, and for that countermethods are ideal, as they work to allude to the reality of the work rather than reduce it to its parts or effects. An analyst may find the work's entrancing qualities by altering its rhythmic consistency, or unveil its apocalyptic vision by making changes to its underlying harmonic structure.

⁶⁴ Ross, "John Luther Adams's *Become Ocean*."

Become Ocean exemplifies the metaphoric structures that form the basis of *allure*. The title of the work guides or steers the way in which a beholder perceives its sensual qualities (its temporal unfolding). Thus, the listener may attempt to reconcile whatever qualities are present with some oceanic object or an apocalyptic vision of the future, thereby generating a new object of contemplation. This leads to one last brief consideration: aesthetic experience according to OOO's theory of art, a topic that is central to every chapter here.

In general, throughout this dissertation, I treat musical works as *art*, still a fairly contentious term that remains ill-defined within the study of aesthetics but which has a specific meaning within the context of the theoretical framework adopted here. In his book *Art and Objects*, Harman outlines OOO's theory of art. There, he suggests that, alongside the principles of OOO, art may be defined as *de-literalization*, an object in conflict with itself, or *non-literal experience*, an encounter with that conflict.⁶⁵ *Allure* then forms the basis of all aesthetic experience, and this leads to one last consideration here, as that point informs all three of my chapters.

For OOO, art is a cognitive activity and *not* a form of knowledge (which does not exclude the possibility that art can lead to knowledge about something).⁶⁶ OOO and art are allies against literalism, or the idea that there is nothing more to an object than the sum total of its qualities (normal everyday perception). Literal statements (whether literary, musical, or otherwise) treat objects as interchangeable with a list of qualities that they possess. Non-literal statements, like metaphors, however, act as a source of non-literal experience or *alluring tension*. Metaphors fuse objects with sensual qualities that do not literally fit with that object. In moments

⁶⁵ De-literalization does not mean *making something weird(er)* but something like *revealing, unveiling, or uncovering* (the inherent strangeness of reality)—capturing the irreducible nature of an object and its qualities.

⁶⁶ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 30.

of alluring tension, the gap between an object and its qualities becomes at issue. Allure, Harman notes, “apparently brings objects directly into play by invoking them as dark agents at work beneath those qualities.”⁶⁷ This point, so essential to every chapter that follows, concludes this very brief overview of OOO. I discuss aspects of the theory in more detail throughout the following chapters, where I address their implications for ecomusicological studies.

Chapter overviews

Chapter 1 brings Morton’s concepts of *the ecological thought* and *dark ecology* into dialogue with OOO to explore how they can inform ecocritical music studies. I apply both to an interpretive analysis of Sarah Kirkland Snider’s *Mass for the Endangered* and examine how that work aestheticizes ecological awareness. This chapter considers how object-oriented approaches to music criticism can reveal the ways in which some music reflects and translates the realities of present-day environmental crises for listeners.

Chapter 2 takes Caroline Shaw’s string quartet *The Evergreen* as a case study in object-oriented approaches to musical aesthetics. Building on the previous chapter, I examine how music actually brings listeners into contact with objects. Specifically, I examine how the work’s oblique representation of its titular object invites listeners to encounter an evergreen indirectly. Drawing on Morton’s proposed object-oriented sublime from their book *Realist Magic*, which challenges traditional Romantic-era, anthropocentric conceptions of the sublime, I argue that the objects that *The Evergreen* depicts are sublime. This chapter demonstrates how OOO can productively support engagement with key topics in musical aesthetics and intervene in

⁶⁷ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 150.

ecocritical music studies by reframing questions of human-nonhuman entanglement, agency, and coexistence in relation to music.

Chapter 3 deals with John Luther Adams's philosophy of music. I analyze what Adams has said about *music and place* and *music as place* through the lens of OOO. I approach those two topics through three separate but closely related other topics: "sonic geography," translation, and Alaska. I treat Adams's thoughts as inherently philosophical and ask what kind of metaphysics suits his way of thinking about music, art, aesthetics, place, and nonhuman things. I show that Adams's thoughts find ground within OOO and suggest that his music is best characterized as object-oriented, at least with respect to its emphasis on place. This chapter contributes to music studies broadly by offering new insight into the ontological structure of place as it manifests in and through music-related practices. This chapter represents the first sustained exploration of Adams's philosophy of music.

The final chapter provides additional reflections on the ideas, topics, and concepts covered for the consideration of future scholars. I explain how my chapters may be consulted individually or collectively for the benefit of those who wish to pursue object-oriented (eco)musicology, and I address some of the main concerns and problems music scholars are likely to face by adopting object-oriented thinking in their work. I conclude by reiterating the importance of object-oriented thinking within ecomusicology.

CHAPTER 1: Listening “deep down things”: The Dark Ecology of Sarah Kirkland

Snider’s *Mass for the Endangered*

Introduction

In July 2015, Trinity Church Wall Street in New York City announced its “Mass Reimaginings” project, a commissioning initiative curated by composer Daniel Felsenfeld. Five composers—Netsayi Chigwendere, Jonathan Newman, Paola Prestini, Julian Wachner, and Sarah Kirkland Snider—were invited to offer their own twenty-first-century takes on the traditional Mass. According to Wachner, Trinity’s former music director, the organization had “never undertaken such an ambitious project before, particularly one that is intended to enrich and impact the repertory in such a significant manner.”⁶⁸ Trinity’s only stipulation was that each composer retain the original Latin text for the Gloria, Sanctus, and Benedictus movements in their works so that they may be used in church services.⁶⁹

Mass for the Endangered (2018) was Sarah Kirkland Snider’s first large-scale choral commission. Snider describes her work as “a hymn for the voiceless and the discounted, a requiem for the not-yet-gone.”⁷⁰ She has credited the ecological theme of the Mass to her friend

⁶⁸ “Trinity Wall Street Announces ‘Mass Reimaginings,’ a Major New Long-Term Commissioning Project,” 21C Media Group, archived July 13, 2015, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20150713024343/https://21cmediagroup.com/2015/07/08/trinity-wall-street-announces-mass-reimaginings-a-major-new-long-term-commissioning-project/>. See also Ross, “Mass Reimaginings,” *The Rest Is Noise*, July 8, 2015, <https://www.therestisnoise.com/2015/07/mass-reimaginings.html>.

Felsenfeld’s *Astrophysical Mass*, which premiered in December 2015, was the first contribution to the project.

⁶⁹ Natalia Kazaryan, “Sarah Kirkland Snider’s Mass for the Endangered; Call to Action to Save Planet,” *Classical Post*, November 16, 2020, <https://classicalpost.com/read/2020/11/16/sarah-kirkland-snider-mass-for-the-endangered-call-to-action-to-save-planet>.

⁷⁰ “Mass for the Endangered,” Wise Music Classical, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/58208/Mass-for-the-Endangered--Sarah-Kirkland-Snider/>. The Mass follows Snider’s work on *The Blue Hour* (2017), an expansive song cycle set to excerpts from Carolyn Forché’s

and frequent collaborator, the poet, writer, and visual artist Nathaniel Bellows, who contributed original English text to four of the work's six movements. In an interview, Snider remarked that she and Bellows "share a deep love of the natural world," and that when she asked Bellows what he would want to write about she already knew the answer: "endangered animals and the global environmental crisis."⁷¹ Snider's *Mass*, a work steeped in eco-anxiety, provides a compelling case study for examining how contemporary musical works in the Western art music tradition can foster ecological awareness.⁷²

What does it mean to think ecologically about music? Might ecological thinking about music help us to understand, mitigate, and adapt to the crisis of the so-called Anthropocene?⁷³ Aaron S. Allen and Jeff Todd Titon pose these questions at the start of a recent volume of ecomusicological scholarship.⁷⁴ Both questions invite contemplation on how music might foster ways of (re)thinking coexistence within a period of global ecological instability. Indeed, the

poem "On Earth" and composed in collaboration with Rachel Grimes, Angélica Negrón, Shara Nova, and Caroline Shaw.

⁷¹ Kazaryan, "Sarah Kirkland Snider's *Mass* for the Endangered."

Snider is not the first composer to tackle environmental issues in a *Mass* setting. At least three other American concert masses focus on raising ecological awareness: Paul Winter's *Missa Gaia/Earth Mass* (1982); Daniel Lentz's *wolfMASS* (1987), and Libby Larsen's *Missa Gaia: Mass for the Earth* (1992). Von Glahn discusses the latter in her book *Libby Larsen: Composing an American Life* (University of Illinois Press, 2017).

⁷² Throughout this project, I follow Morton's understanding of the phrase "ecological awareness." Ecological awareness entails "thinking and acting ethically and politically on a lot of scales, not just one"; it involves "the explosion of contextualization"; it means "realizing that there are lots of different temporality formats" and, most importantly, "acknowledging in a deep way the existence of beings that aren't you, with whom you co-exist." Morton, *Being Ecological*, 23, 45, and 79, respectively.

⁷³ Interest in the Anthropocene has grown steadily within music studies over the last decade or so. Indicative of this growing interest was the formation of the Music Studies in/of the Anthropocene Research Network (MSARN): Jade Conlee, "Conference Report: 'Ruptures and Convergences: Music Studies and the Anthropocene,'" *Music Theory Online* 29, no. 2 (June 2023): <https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.23.29.2/mto.23.29.2.conlee.php>. In 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences rejected the official proposal to formalize the Anthropocene as the latest geological epoch. Despite this, the term still helpfully names a global reality.

⁷⁴ Allen and Titon, *Sounds, Ecologies, Musics*, 1. Both questions highlight the fact that ecomusicological scholarship generally seeks to challenge anthropocentric assumptions by shifting the focus to relations between nonhuman things.

Anthropocene raises the stakes on ontological claims, explicit or not, as it obliges one to confront the inadequacy of human-centered paradigms. As a framework for ecocritical inquiry, the Anthropocene exposes the limits of approaches that privilege a human-world correlation, even when those approaches seek to destabilize that correlation. That contradiction highlights the need for theoretical and conceptual tools that move beyond mere critique of anthropocentrism toward alternative ways of conceiving agency or, to put it another way, how things exist.

It must be noted that there is a difference between asking how *music* can bring about ecological awareness and how *thinking about* music can bring about ecological awareness. Both topics are relevant here. Rehding poses a question that seems to imply both: “What can music do to help turn our collective attention to the future?”⁷⁵ This question, which assumes that music has the potential to influence how we contemplate and imagine the future, sets the stage for this chapter. Here, I propose that Morton’s ecocritical and eco-philosophical work provides some intriguing responses to that question. To bridge the gap between that work and music studies proves to be a precarious endeavor, though, given Morton’s strong ties to OOO, a philosophical vantage point that tends to challenge modern assumptions wherever it goes.⁷⁶ Through

⁷⁵ Rehding, “Dear SEM,” *SEM Students News* 19.1 “Music and the Anthropocene” (Spring/Summer 2023): 6–8.

⁷⁶ The taxonomic distinction between *human* and *world* being the chief modern assumption.

Morton’s thoughts about ecology often find their clearest explanation in OOO. As an example, take their idea of *strange strangers* (irreducibly strange life forms), an idea that is comparable with OOO’s conception of *real objects*, entities that are (strangely) irreducible to their parts or effects. For Morton’s use of the term *strange stranger*, see Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 38–50, 59–97. In an article published after *The Ecological Thought*, Morton acknowledges that their idea of strange strangers is more accurately conveyed by OOO’s understanding of real objects: “I see no inherent reason why what I called the strange stranger in *The Ecological Thought* should not apply to any entity whatsoever.” Morton, “Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics,” *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012): 132.

Moreover, Morton’s eco-trilogy (*Ecology Without Nature*, *The Ecological Thought*, and *Dark Ecology*) presents a few challenges for ecomusicology. For one thing, it primarily belongs to the field of literary theory and criticism. Morton typically uses close readings of poetry to help clarify their ideas. References to individual musical works and even lengthy reflections on music, however, occur quite regularly and sometimes even take center stage: Morton, *Realist Magic*, 15–24 and Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of the World*

interpretive analysis of Snider's *Mass*, I provide some initial support for a connection between Morton's work and music studies. In doing so, this chapter addresses a central issue for ecomusicological studies: namely, how music can not only help with understanding the history of the Anthropocene but also support ways of making sense of the future that it anticipates.

Careful attention to Morton's work and its full range of implications for thinking ecologically about music (and thinking about music *as* ecological) has yet to emerge, despite its steady influence in other areas of the environmental humanities, ecophilosophical discourse, and literary theory. This chapter addresses that gap in the literature. Morton's work is significant because, among other reasons, it provides a rich array of conceptual tools for thinking about complex, planetary-scale issues like global warming, and helpfully diagnoses eco-anxiety in its various stages and forms. In general, it grapples with what it means to think ecologically and to *be* ecological in the twenty-first century.⁷⁷ I touch on only a fraction of what that work might contribute to ecomusicological studies here.⁷⁸

I examine two of Morton's most significant conceptual contributions: *the ecological thought* and *dark ecology*, each of which Morton details in two separate monographs of the same names, respectively, and visits elsewhere in numerous other publications.⁷⁹ I bring both concepts

(University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 29–31. Understanding the implications of Morton's work for ecomusicology means understanding how it aligns with object-oriented thought.

⁷⁷ In addition to *Being Ecological*, see also Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (Verso Books, 2017) and Morton, *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

⁷⁸ Nature, environment, and place are key concepts in ecomusicology. Pedelty et al., "Ecomusicology." The history and usage of these concepts within scholarly discourse, and their relation to ecological thinking in general, has been a major focus of Morton's ecocritical and ecophilosophical work for more than a decade now. Within the realm of ecomusicology, not enough attention has been paid to how this work has problematized these concepts. The phrase "ecological thinking" (sometimes "thinking ecologically") itself deserves further scrutiny, something Morton also handily provides.

⁷⁹ Morton, "John Clare's Dark Ecology," *Studies in Romanticism* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 179–93; Morton, "Spectral Life: The Uncanny Valley Is in Fact a Gigantic Plain, Stretching as Far as the Eye Can See in Every

into contact with ecomusicological thinking through my study of Snider's *Mass*. Despite the definite article, the ecological thought is not something that can be pointed to directly. It is not a singular thought or even a *kind* of thought. Morton describes it as the source of ecological awareness, something that eludes direct perception, experience, knowledge, and thinking itself. My work here draws out the implicit object-oriented perspective of that concept. I read Morton's concept of the ecological thought as an object in the OOO sense, as something irreducible to its components or its effects on other things. I claim that it belongs to the interior of Snider's *Mass* in the same way that a waterlily belongs to a Monet. This claim is interpretive and ontological in a speculative sense, since one cannot directly point to the existence of the ecological thought in the *Mass*. Ultimately, I contend that the ecological thought is the source of whatever ecological awareness Snider's work bestows on its listener, and that how the *Mass* stylizes the ecological thought corresponds to the aesthetics of dark ecology.⁸⁰

Dark ecology is ecological awareness that embraces ecological reality in all its strangeness and unpleasantness, that is radically open to guilt, shame, melancholy, horror, disgust, and abjection. Dark ecology is, in many ways, a response to the Anthropocene. Indeed, Morton suggests that the aesthetic and poetic aspects of dark ecology correspond to the aesthetics of the Anthropocene and to the issues that concept raises in relation to thinking ecologically.⁸¹ Consequently, the kind of ecological thinking that the Anthropocene entails becomes accessible to listeners through works characterized by dark ecology. Snider's *Mass* provides its listeners a

Direction," in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. Jami Weinstein and Claire Colebrook (Columbia University Press, 2017), 271–93; and Morton, "Art in the Age of Asymmetry."

⁸⁰ For OOO, the qualities and parts of things are imbued with the style or feel of the thing as a whole. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 11. See also Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 55–58. For the difference between qualities and parts, see Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 154.

⁸¹ "The Anthropocene," Morton writes, "is Nature in its toxic nightmare form." Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 59.

glimpse into the reality of the Anthropocene, or what Morton simply calls “an age of mass extinction.”⁸² I entertain dark ecology as a useful tool for musical analysis rather than an ecological theory for a logic of future coexistence (the subtitle of Morton’s monograph).

This chapter has three interconnected goals. The first is to demonstrate how two of Morton’s most important concepts, the ecological thought and dark ecology, can be useful to (eco)musicological endeavors, or thinking ecologically about music. Because Morton discusses both in relation to twenty-first-century environmental themes, the second aim is to apply those concepts to an interpretive analysis of a twenty-first-century musical work to better understand how music that is either explicitly or implicitly environmentally oriented can support listener engagement with the reality of present-day environmental issues. The third goal is to reveal object-oriented music criticism as a productive framework for musical analysis in an ecocritical mode.⁸³ The pursuit of all three supports a response to the question regarding how music might turn our attention to the future.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce Snider’s *Mass*. I cover how Snider and Bellows have described the work, the role of the visual art created for it, and the libretto. In the second section, I provide explanations of the ecological thought and dark ecology according to passages in Morton’s work and survey reception of the 2020 recording which helpfully illustrates how others have recognized the dark ecological aesthetics of the work. In the next section I contrast dark ecology with how ecomusicology has handled the concepts of Nature, environment,

⁸² Morton, *Being Ecological*, 5–8. Some scholars have posited that the Anthropocene is primarily an aesthetic phenomenon: Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (Open Humanities Press, 2015).

⁸³ With its emphasis on the autonomy of objects and their parts, OOO provides a truly ecological framework for thinking about the reality of musical works. I use “criticism” in the sense of interpretive judgement. I am not interested in what the *Mass* “means” but its aesthetic effects, or how it asks listeners to *attune* to it. I understand tuning or attunement the same way Morton does in “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 205–24.

place, and “ecological thinking.” As a preface to my analytical commentary on the work, I address the objectives of object-oriented music criticism and the implications of object-oriented formalism for interpretive musical analysis, a topic that will also prove relevant to the next chapter. Finally, I apply both concepts to interpretive and analytical commentary on Snider’s *Mass*. I examine passages in the work that highlight its dark-ecological qualities. I organize my interpretive remarks around the three primary layers (zones) of dark ecology that Morton identifies: *depression*, *uncanniness*, and *sweetness*.⁸⁴ I conclude with comments on how Morton’s concepts may apply to ecomusicological thinking more broadly, beyond the sort of interpretive work I conduct here.

Mass for the Endangered

Following the commission from Trinity Wall Street, Snider composed five movements of the *Mass* in early 2018. “Once I started writing,” she recalled in a 2020 interview, “the music came quickly, for me—a few months.”⁸⁵ She spent the following year revising the work and added the Alleluia movement to highlight the lower voices of the choir.⁸⁶ Snider has admitted to being an intensely self-critical composer and not unused to revising her works several times after hearing them performed.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Morton refers to these three zones as layers, as in a concentric circle. I use the term “zone” to evoke the oceanographic concept of the water column, which implies a gradual descent into darker and darker territory, and because the corresponding zones in that concept, although conceptually divided, in reality blend with one another, as in a linear color gradient. Dark ecology implies a depthless ocean.

⁸⁵ Snider, “Q&A: Sarah Kirkland Snider on Composing & Recording ‘Mass for the Endangered,’” September 28, 2020, interview by Francisco Salazar, *Opera Wire*, September 28, 2020, <https://operawire.com/q-a-sarah-kirkland-snider-on-new-recording-mass-for-the-endangered-writing-the-piece/>.

⁸⁶ Snider, “Q&A.”

⁸⁷ Mike Telin, “The Cleveland Orchestra, a conversation with composer Sarah Kirkland Snider,” *Cleveland Classical*, August 2, 2023, <https://clevelandclassical.com/the-cleveland-orchestra-a-conversation-with-composer-sarah-kirkland-snider/>.

Recalling the initial creative stages of the Mass, Snider states in one interview: “I was thrilled to immerse myself in memories of singing the Mozart, Brahms, and Fauré requiems, the Palestrina and Byrd masses, the Bach chorales.”⁸⁸ For eight summers in her youth, Snider participated in the musical summer program at the American Boychoir School where she sang as a chorister.⁸⁹ In another interview Snider states that her experience singing Mozart’s Requiem in particular exerted an enormous influence on the Mass.⁹⁰ Regarding the influence of other composers, she continues: “Rather than consciously upend those traditions, I wanted to open the gates in my mind between centuries-old European vocal traditions and those of more recent American vernacular persuasion, and write from a place where differing thoughts about line, text, form, and expression could co-exist.”⁹¹ These remarks suggest Snider took something like an ecological approach to the composition of the Mass.

The Mass premiered on April 16, 2018 as part of Trinity’s three-month-long “Total Embrace” concert series celebrating the centennial of Leonard Bernstein.⁹² The work, composed for SATB chorus and eleven instruments (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, vibraphone, marimba, crotale, piano, harp, string quartet, and contrabass), uses the five fundamental parts of the Mass Ordinary (the Alleluia belongs to the Proper). The Kyrie, Gloria, Alleluia, and Agnus Dei

⁸⁸ “Mass for the Endangered,” Bandcamp, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://sarahkirklandsnider.bandcamp.com/album/mass-for-the-endangered>.

⁸⁹ “Snider, Sarah Kirkland, 2019 September 30,” interview by Libby Van Cleve, *Oral History of American Music: Major Figures in American Music*, Music Library of Yale University, September 30, 2019, audio, https://yalemusiclib.aviaryplatform.com/collections/931/collection_resources/31392.

⁹⁰ St. John Flynn, host, *With One Accord*, season 3, episode 8, “Behind the Music | Sarah Kirkland Snider,” January 27, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/with-one-accord/id1513230854>.

⁹¹ “Mass for the Endangered,” Bandcamp, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://sarahkirklandsnider.bandcamp.com/album/mass-for-the-endangered>.

⁹² A recording of the livestream is available on Trinity’s website: <https://trinitywallstreet.org/videos/total-embrace-leonard-bernstein-100-7>.

movements all feature additional English text by Bellows. A recording of the Mass, the fourth album in a partnership between New Amsterdam Records and Nonesuch, was released in September 2020, and features the English vocal ensemble Gallicantus conducted by Gabriel Crouch. In notes for the album, Snider shares her thoughts about the concept of the work:

The origin of the Mass is rooted in humanity's concern for itself, expressed through worship of the divine which, in the Catholic tradition, is a God in the image of man. Nathaniel and I thought it would be interesting to take the Mass's musical modes of spiritual contemplation and apply them to concern for non-human life—animals, plants, and the environment. There is an appeal to a higher power—for mercy, forgiveness, and intervention—but that appeal is directed not to God but rather to Nature itself.⁹³

Bellows has collaborated with Snider on two other environmentally-oriented projects: *Ouroboros* (2015) and *Unremembered* (2017).⁹⁴ *Ouroboros* parallels the Mass in terms of orchestration and creative goals: the work is a meditation on “the possibility and potential that lies within a rebirth, reorganization, and regeneration of our relationship with the earth.”⁹⁵ Like the Mass, it also features a chorus, a string quartet, and percussion. According to a description on Snider's official website, the thirteen-part orchestral song cycle *Unremembered*, which remains Bellows's largest contribution to one of Snider's works to date, is a meditation on “memory, innocence, and haunted grandeur of the natural world.”⁹⁶ Like the Mass, these works may be categorized as what this project calls ecological music—music that incites ecological awareness

⁹³ “Mass for the Endangered,” New Amsterdam Records, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.newamrecords.com/albums/mass-for-the-endangered>.

⁹⁴ Some of the songs in *Unremembered* date from 2011. Kazaryan, “Sarah Kirkland Snider's Mass for the Endangered.”

⁹⁵ “Ouroboros,” Roots in the Sky, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://rootsinthesky.org/ouroboros>.

⁹⁶ “Unremembered,” Sarah Kirkland Snider, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.sarahkirklandsnider.com/albums/unremembered>. While *Unremembered* may be categorized as a work of ecological music, it may also be categorized as a *place work*—a work that evokes, represents, or portrays a particular place. Music as place-making and place-sensing has been a central focus of much ecomusicological scholarship and I turn to this topic in Chapter 3.

through its handling of environmentally related topics and themes. Of course, nature is a central topic in *Mass for the Endangered*, but the work avoids what Morton refers to as Romantic notions of Nature as a *place-over-there*, the same notions which form the basis for their critique of Nature in their book *Ecology without Nature*. Instead, the Mass puts forward a more ecological understanding of nature; a more inclusive, global understanding of the concept which conforms to thinking nature in the twenty-first century, at least in the context of contemporary U.S. culture, where conversations about nature typically relate to global warming, biodiversity, and how advancements in science and technology relate to global environmental concerns.

Snider stated in one interview that she and Bellows took on the subject of endangered species and global warming “for personal reasons [...] rather than political ones, per se,” that they “weren’t explicitly striving to galvanize change,” and that, moreover, she prefers art that “gives people space to reflect internally.”⁹⁷ In another interview, Snider asserted something similar: “What we tend to underestimate is that if the art speaks to someone, it can actually make a difference.”⁹⁸ These comments suggest that Snider sees her work not as a call to action but as an opportunity to press pause on our habitual apathy toward nonhuman things, to spend time “tuning” to them instead; that is, coexisting with them via the musical work.⁹⁹ Morton has

⁹⁷ “Fifteen Questions Interview with Sarah Kirkland Snider,” *Fifteen Questions*, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://15questions.net/interview/fifteen-questions-interview-sarah-kirkland-snider/page-2/>.

⁹⁸ Kazaryan, “Sarah Kirkland Snider’s *Mass for the Endangered*.” Nevertheless, topics like global warming, endangered animals, and the impact of anthropogenic effects on the planet are political ones. To what extent do these topics and their alliance with the Mass make it a political work? For the object-oriented thinker, *Mass for the Endangered* is political if and only if it gives aesthetic life to those topics, but it is not political insofar as it brings those topics into its orbit, or inspires listeners to take stock of their role in environmental politics. Political elements become relevant to *Mass for the Endangered* by contributing to its autonomy. Harman discusses three problems OOO finds with traditional formalism in Harman, “Three Problems of Formalism: An Object-Oriented View” in *New Directions in Philosophy and Literature*, ed. David Rudrum, Ridvan Askin, and Frida Beckman (Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

⁹⁹ On attunement, Morton writes: “Since a thing cannot be known directly or totally, one can only attune to it, with greater or lesser degrees of intimacy. Nor is this attunement a ‘merely’ aesthetic approach to a basically blank

suggested that, in an age of ecological awareness, “ecological art is going to be more and more about this kind of tuning.”¹⁰⁰ Nonhuman things (especially those that raise environmental concerns, like global warming, viruses, and trash) now impinge on everyday awareness in ways that induce ecological awareness—a kind of *weird* ecological awareness in which one recognizes or begins to recognize the irreducible gap between the reality of something and its appearances.¹⁰¹ Art provides cognitive pathways to help make sense of this awareness.

Visual art often influences Snider’s work.¹⁰² Brooklyn-based visual artist Deborah “CandyStations” Johnson created music videos for each movement of the work based on illustrations by Bellows.¹⁰³ These videos sometimes accompany performances of the work. My analytical commentary focuses exclusively on the experience of listening to Snider’s *Mass* without its accompanying visual artwork. From an object-oriented standpoint, the experience of the work alongside or through its music videos would constitute a different object of study altogether. It is worth drawing attention to the music videos here, though, as they highlight aspects of the work that are relevant to the discussion at hand.

extensional substance. Since appearance can’t be peeled decisively from the reality of a thing, attunement is a living, dynamic relation with another being—it doesn’t stop.” Morton, *Being Ecological*, 89.

¹⁰⁰ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 22.

¹⁰¹ This is how Harman and others in dialogue with OOO favor the use of the term *weird*. Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Zero Books, 2012).

¹⁰² During the initial creative stages of her work *Unremembered* (2011), Snider recalls how Bellows arrived “unexpectedly accompanied by five corresponding illustrations he had drawn” and recalls how, considering the one Bellows had created to accompany the poem for “The Guest,” she immediately heard the song’s opening melodic line. A description on the official website for the work states that *Unremembered* is “an assemblage of vividly intense, imagistic vignettes.” “About Unremembered,” Unremembered-Music, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.unremembered-music.com/about-unremembered>.

¹⁰³ From 2001 to 2007, Snider co-curated the Look + Listen Festival: “About,” Sarah Kirkland Snider, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.sarahkirklandsnider.com/bio>. See also Look + Listen, “Past Seasons,” accessed April 10, 2026, <https://lookandlisten.org/festival/past/>.

“Mass,” CandyStations, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://candystations.com/mass>. A separate website hosts the music videos for *Mass for the Endangered*: <https://www.streamingmuseum.org/mass-for-the-endangered>.

The music video for the Kyrie depicts a blank triptych or panel painting. As the video progresses, intricate geometrical figures and illustrations of various species gradually pervade the panels, eventually spilling over their boundaries, dyeing both the panels and the place surrounding them blue. The music videos for the Gloria and the Alleluia portray balanced environments transformed by dramatic anthropogenic disturbances. The future is portrayed as bleak for many species. The Credo and Sanctus/Benedictus videos depict life forms and the cosmos as interconnected through a series of kaleidoscopic effects. The music video for the Agnus Dei, the final movement, features an assortment of the same imagery used in the other videos. Conductor Jamie L. Bunce, who received Snider's guidance on a performance of the work, remarks that, from her own experience, staging the work with the visual artwork projected somewhere "is worth the effort and expense. The beautiful images and coordinated lighting enhance the direct musical expression of an already organically expressive work."¹⁰⁴

In keeping with the solemnity of the traditional Mass and the theme of the work, Bellows's supplemental poetry is generally gloomy. The Kyrie features five short English stanzas, all of which pray for mercy on all nonhuman things. Each stanza attempts to pay tribute to as many nonhumans as possible: "Give mercy to all wing and paw / Mercy to all creed and

¹⁰⁴ Jamie L. Bunce, "Sarah Kirkland Snider's Mass for the Endangered: An Analysis and Conductor's Guide" (A Lecture Recital Essay, University of Miami, 2023), 51.

On July 8, 2020, the music video for the fifth movement, "Sanctus/Benedictus," was released on YouTube. Music videos for the other movements followed over the course of the next year-and-a-half with the largest gap between the release of the last two videos: Sanctus/Benedictus (8 July 2020); Kyrie (19 August 2020); Alleluia (25 September 2020); Credo (10 December 2020); Gloria (29 June 2021), and Agnus Dei (24 January 2022). Only the music video for the Agnus Dei features a description written by Deborah Johnson: the video is "a culmination of all the visuals thus far, a 'Cathedral of the Cosmos,' honoring and receiving the animal and plant species that no longer find life on Earth sustainable. [...] The larger theme is that of a tree—a kind of Yggdrasil—an eternal green ash tree in Norse mythology. It stands in the middle of the world, rooted in the earth but reaching to the heavens, the physical/natural embodiment of both realms. In each of these realms, a benevolent lamb is present—starting with a primordial coral core, ascending through roots, totems, trees, skies, and heaven." Nonesuch Records, "Sarah Kirkland Snider - Agnus Dei (Official Video)," YouTube video, January 27, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_E_NeTpd1mY.

claw / On flower, seed, leaf and root” (second stanza). A final line, dramatically set apart from the five stanzas in the libretto, turns the prayer towards humans: “And mercy now for what we’ve done.” With this line, listeners may find themselves unexpectedly implicated in the environmental issues to which the work as a whole alludes. The text for the Alleluia features abrupt shifts in imagery (“Contour, carve, corrode— / breathe through camphor, coal, / seed each breeze with gold. / Poison, parch, pollute— / plow the coast, the dune, / flow toward constant moon”) along with an unsettling warning: “She who is sleeping, / Is she who will wake.” The Credo features twelve separate stanzas and is Bellows’s most significant contribution to the work. The phrase “We believe,” repeated twenty-two separate times, helps to characterize the Credo as the most optimistic movement in the work. The ecological theme of the Mass makes the symbol of the lamb in the final movement ambiguous.

Mass for the Endangered is more than a requiem for this year’s list of endangered species: The Kyrie asks a “barren, poisoned land” for forgiveness, and the Credo sings to “stone and moss, sand and grass.” The music videos for the Gloria and the Alleluia portray fragile ecosystems under threat. The Sanctus/Benedictus presents troubled optimism and the Agnus Dei reflects on the innocence of nonhuman things threatened by anthropogenic climate change. The Mass appeals for parity and compassion toward nonhuman things beyond those which humans (may occasionally) ascribe sentience.

The ecological thought

“The ecological crisis we face is so obvious that it becomes easy—for some, strangely or frighteningly easy—to join the dots and see that everything is interconnected. This is *the*

ecological thought. And the more we consider it, the more our world opens up.”¹⁰⁵ This is how Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* begins. One way to read this passage would be to take the phrase “the ecological thought” as a descriptive noun for the kind of ecological awareness Morton alludes to in the first sentence, as in *this kind of ecological awareness is the ecological thought*, or *thinking interconnectedness just is the ecological thought*. From an object-oriented standpoint, however, the passage suggests that ecological awareness is something traceable to an object that Morton calls “the ecological thought.” If thinking is a derivative of attunement (what objects do when they encounter one another), then ecological awareness (at least for humans anyway) is a derivative of attuning to the object that Morton calls the ecological thought. It is a side effect of attuning to that object. The second sentence is therefore clearer if read: “This is *the ecological thought* at work.” Numerous passages throughout Morton’s book indicate that the ecological thought is helpfully understood as an object that one only ever encounters indirectly as opposed to a process or operation one voluntarily chooses to perform. “One doesn’t *act* awareness,” Morton declares, “it happens to one.”¹⁰⁶ In this way, thinking the ecological thought may be akin to thinking the Anthropocene, too.

Morton imagines the ecological thought through an assortment of analogies, metaphors, and oblique descriptions. The following examples from the introduction of *The Ecological Thought* have been selected primarily for their conciseness and because they illustrate that the topic lends itself to an object-oriented reading: “How do we begin? Where do we go from here? Is that the sound of something calling us from within the grief—the sound of the ecological

¹⁰⁵ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Morton, *Humankind*, 186. Morton also writes: “The default theory of action wants a smooth in-between zone because it wants to ascertain how to get from A to B—one wants to be in control of awareness. One wants to be *doing* something, as opposed to *letting something happen*.” Morton, *Humankind*, 187. Similarly, Morton writes that attunement (which they also refer to as *ecognosis*) “is like knowing, but more like letting be known.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5.

thought?”¹⁰⁷ Here, questions regarding ecological crises signal the presence of the object. (The three questions posed at the beginning of this chapter signal the presence of it here, too.) It is “a virus that infects all other areas of thinking,” a thing that “creeps over other ideas until nowhere is left untouched by its dark presence,” and then as a “force” that transforms thought.¹⁰⁸ (Dark ecology explains why Morton refers to its presence as “dark.”) Morton also establishes that “it doesn’t just occur ‘in the mind.’”¹⁰⁹ Because *thinking it* is so difficult (thinking it directly or fully is impossible), Morton refers to it metaphorically as “a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings.”¹¹⁰ Crucially, it is also “always to come, somewhere in the future.” Because of the rift between what the ecological thought *is* and how it appears (its manifestations in the aesthetic dimension), because its reality remains interminably withdrawn, always just beyond the horizon, Morton concludes that it “*will have been thought* at some undefined future point.”¹¹¹ Finally, Morton calls it “a thinking that is

¹⁰⁷ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ *The Ecological Thought*, 2–3. Passages throughout *The Ecological Thought* indicate that Morton imagines the ecological thought as a *hyperobject*, an object massively distributed in time and space relative to other entities, an idea they introduce in that same book but only fully realize later in *Hyperobjects*. Some notable passages from the introduction of *The Ecological Thought* include: “When we start looking, we find the ecological thought everywhere”; “The ecological thought affects all aspects of life, culture, and society”; “The ecological thought, while hard to think thoroughly, is easy to latch onto from anywhere”; “Like a virus, the ecological thought infects other systems of thinking and alters them from within, gradually disabling the incompatible ones.” Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 7, 11, 18, and 19.

¹⁰⁹ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 7.

¹¹⁰ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 7.

¹¹¹ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 3. Morton understands the past as appearance and the future as the withdrawn essence of an object. They write: “Since the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension [...] the ‘present’ is not a bubble between past and future, or a blinking cursor, or a point. The present is a construct imposed on an uncanny intermeshing of appearance and essence.” Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 220. Through OOO, Morton comes to understand that the essence of an object, its withdrawn reality, is the future. For example: Morton, *Humankind*, 66. OOO understands the future as the experienced tension between a withdrawn object and its perceptible qualities. OOO’s theory of art holds this same tension responsible for all aesthetic experience. The descriptions of the ecological thought that I present in this section imply that it is an object mainly accessible through non-literal experience.

ecological, a contemplating that is a doing.”¹¹² A listener who forms an attachment with the ecological thought via a musical work may be understood to be engaged in “action that is thoughtful and thought that is active,”¹¹³ a sentiment that aligns with OOO’s understanding of aesthetic experience.¹¹⁴

Because the ecological thought is “so new and so open, and therefore so difficult,” Morton writes, “we should expect art to show us some of the way.”¹¹⁵ OOO recognizes art as a form of cognition that can bring objects into focus without knowledge, which for OOO involves one of two things (or both simultaneously): the reduction of something to either its parts or its relations.¹¹⁶ Accordingly, art is something that dissolves any barrier between thinking and doing. Emphasizing the importance of aesthetics in relation to the ecological thought, Morton describes the ecological thought as “intrinsically dark, mysterious, and open, like [...] an unresolved chord.”¹¹⁷

¹¹² Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 5–7 and 15.

¹¹³ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 9.

¹¹⁴ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 48–82.

¹¹⁵ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 1–3. OOO rejects the Kantian notion of autonomy, which involves the asymmetrical division of reality into two taxonomical zones, one human and the other world (Harman, “Three Problems of Formalism,” 211). This division, which Harman refers to as the taxonomic fallacy, entails ascribing two different ontological structures to two separate *kinds* of beings. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 115–16. As a violation of flat ontology, OOO rejects that division. The autonomous unit of aesthetics, then, for OOO, is a *hybrid entity* comprised of both the beholder and the work. Harman devotes the last chapter of his book *Art and Objects* to what he calls *weird formalism*, which denotes a kind of formalism that pertains to the unmapped interior of the beholder-plus-artwork object. Harman, *Art and Objects*, 11 and 166–79. From a OOO standpoint, if all human beings were to suddenly vanish from the face of the earth, Picasso’s *Family of Saltimbanques* would no longer be an artwork but oil paint on a canvas somewhere in Washington. Art necessarily has reference to a human beholder: “In fact,” Harman notes, “the human is not primarily part of the artwork’s situation, but is an ingredient of the work no less than paint or marble.” Harman, *Art and Objects*, 58. OOO includes the listener’s attention as an element of the artwork itself. See also Harman, “Poe’s Black Cat,” in *Romanticism and Speculative Realism*, ed. Chris Washington and Anne C. McCarthy (Bloomsbury Academic: 2019), 217–35.

¹¹⁷ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 16.

Dark ecology

Morton introduces dark ecology (originally “depthless ecology”) at the beginning of *The Ecological Thought* as a new ecological aesthetics that “puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking.”¹¹⁸ Morton argues that normative ideas of “nature” and “environment” inhibit ecological thinking mainly due to their emphasis on *place*. Pushing back against a progressive ecocritical impulse to dispose of place along with other ideas and attitudes left over from the Romantic period, Morton argues that place itself may be used to explore ecological thinking.¹¹⁹ A key point here, at least concerning dark ecology, and one that brings dark ecology within the realm of OOO, is their assertion that the two claims *place does not exist* and *place is not an independent object* are different. Morton submits that place is real, but does so in language that evokes the withdrawnness of objects: “Place, if anything, is slippery *because it exists*.”¹²⁰ Additionally, Morton proposes thinking place, like nature, not as a *thing-over-there* but as a *thing* in its original sense, a meeting place, or as theory in the sense of a questioning attitude. It is in this context that Morton develops the idea of dark ecology.

Dark ecology recognizes the withdrawal of objects, their strange irreducibility.

Consequently, dark ecology is characterized by melancholia, uncertainty, and anxiety—the

¹¹⁸ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 16. Why *back* into ecological thinking? Morton recognizes that contemporary ecological culture and politics is often about “the reenchantment of the world” (a reference to Morris Berman’s 1981 book of the same name): Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 17. Because OOO insists that reality is withdrawn (and therefore “mysterious and magical,” according to Morton) and that causality is an aesthetic phenomenon, Morton proposes that “OOO could be highly desirable” as far as “reenchanting the world” goes. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 17.

See Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 163 (endnote 4), and Morton *Ecology Without Nature*, 141–143, 181–197. Morton states that dark ecology was conceived as a response to deep ecology and that they originally called it “depthless ecology.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 59.

¹¹⁹ When Pedelty rejects Morton’s call to abandon nature and suggests that “the term has enough plasticity to be reconceptualized, made more useful for today’s purposes,” Pedelty actually agrees with Morton. Pedelty, *Ecomusicology*, 77.

¹²⁰ Morton, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” 180.

feeling that “the more you know about something, the stranger it grows.” Likewise, Morton also points out, “the more you know, the more entangled you realize you are, and the more open and ambiguous everything becomes.”¹²¹ More generally, dark ecology refers to a feeling of coexistence that emerged concurrently with the reality of the Anthropocene: the realization that humans are now, and have been for an indeterminate amount of time, a geological force on a planetary scale. If the ecological thought is the source of ecological awareness, then dark ecology describes the basic characteristics of that awareness in the twenty-first century.

In one of their most candid essays about OOO in the humanities Morton concludes that “OOO allows us to think deep down things.”¹²² This phrase and its adverbial sense of “down” is meant to evoke both the withdrawal of objects, their inaccessible “dark side” that one can never know, and OOO’s insistence that the reality of things can only be approached obliquely, never directly.¹²³ It is because reality withdraws from direct access that thinking the ecological thought is intrinsically dark. Indirect access is exemplified by the use of non-literal statements or expressions, which for OOO’s theory of art are the source of all aesthetic experience. In the case of Homer’s metaphor “wine-dark sea,” for instance (a metaphor Harman regularly adopts for the same purpose), the beholder’s imagination must work to reconcile “wine-dark” qualities with a “sea” object for any aesthetic effect to occur. The beholder brings to life a new object, whose source is a perceptible “sea” object, which by itself produces no aesthetic effect. In those

¹²¹ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 17.

¹²² Morton, “Here Comes Everything,” 185. Morton borrows this turn of phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “God’s Grandeur,” in which the poet “inventively extends the adverbial sense of ‘down’ in phrases such as ‘down the road’ or ‘down the well.’” Morton, “Here Comes Everything,” 166.

¹²³ Morton refers to withdrawnness as *strange strangeness* after their idea of irreducibly strange life forms, or *strange strangers*. Morton, “Here Comes Everything,” 166. Morton refers to the “dark side” of objects a few times in the same essay: Morton, “Here Comes Everything,” 165, 175–76, 180, and 183–84.

moments, the object of the listener's attention becomes something "more real."¹²⁴ By analogy, a listener "finds" the ecological thought within Snider's *Mass* as a term that adopts dark-ecological qualities. It is the listener who brings its reality to life.¹²⁵

Critical responses to *Mass for the Endangered* highlight the efficacy of its ecological message and point to its dark-ecological style. Critic Jonathan Blumhofer remarks that the *Mass* is "unsettling" as well as a "touching and haunting effort" while percussionist Colin Currie similarly suggests that the work "caresses, haunts, and illuminates the listener."¹²⁶ A critic for *WQXR* notes the "spine-tingling textures" of the work and calls it "perfectly fragile music for increasingly fragile circumstances."¹²⁷ David Patrick Stearns, writing for *ArtsJournal*, and in a passage that indicates an especially sensitive listening of the Kyrie movement, suggests that the *Mass* begins by "tipping off the listener that love for the planet will be mixed with sorrow and

¹²⁴ Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology," 43–46.

¹²⁵ Harman notes: "If I do not step in and attempt the electrifying work of becoming the [object] for the [qualities], then no metaphor occurs. This may happen for any number of reasons, including the poor quality of the metaphor, the obtuseness of the beholder, or even the boredom or distractedness of the [beholder]. The successful metaphor [...] will only occur when the reader or auditor is sincerely deployed in living it." Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 87. Note that, despite Harman's use of phrases like "step in and attempt," the beholder's theatrical substitution for the missing object does not happen in time or by prior choice but is a formal consequence of the impossibility of direct real-real contact. I am grateful to Taxier for bringing this crucial detail to my attention.

If Snider's *Mass* successfully "evokes" the ecological thought, then its beholder enters an attachment with an object that alludes to it through the experienced tension that OOO calls *allure*, which is the basis of all aesthetic experience. See Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 142–44, 172–82 and Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology," 43–46. As the ecological thought cannot be immediately translated into any sort of musical representation, in my interpretive remarks I attend to passages in Snider's *Mass* that I believe effectively allude to that object. In contrast to *allure*, which, experientially and at least with respect to OOO's theory of art, generally constitutes moments of surprise (wherein a sensual object alludes to a deeper withdrawn reality), *sincerity* is the name that OOO gives for the ordinary state of relations or experience (contact between a real object and a sensual one).

¹²⁶ Jonathan Blumhofer, "Classical CD Reviews: 'Babel,' Sarah Kirkland Snider's 'Mass for the Endangered,' and John Luther Adams' 'Become Trilogy,'" *The Arts Fuse*, December 16, 2020, <https://artsfuse.org/218174/classical-cd-reviews-babel-sarah-kirkland-sniders-mass-for-the-endangered-and-john-luther-adams-become-trilogy/>. Colin Currie, "Colin Currie: 6 pieces of music I couldn't live without," *Southbank Centre*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/magazine/colin-currie-6-pieces-of-music-i-couldnt-live-without/>.

¹²⁷ "Latest/Greatest October 2020," *WQXR*, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.wqxr.org/story/latest-greatest-october-2020/>.

anger over its current state of degradation.”¹²⁸ In a review of the 2020 album, Kate Wakeling describes the Mass as “luminous and arresting” and that it “conveys its urgent ecological message with power and beauty.”¹²⁹ Writing for *San Francisco Classical Voice*, Steven Winn calls the work “diaphanous and urgent, exultant and wary,” and that it “immerses us in this perilous era and stirs us to examine our collective conscience.”¹³⁰ Winn also suggests that ambiguity, reversed polarities, and layered meaning are attributes of the work’s libretto, and notes that “there are no consoling tonic chords”—the Mass “seems to turn back on itself, renounce its own premises, fall into abrupt silences.”¹³¹ Irony, doubt, and wonder are key characteristics of dark ecology and at the center of theory, from which Morton’s critique of Nature and environment (as place), and consequently dark ecology, emerges.¹³²

Mass for the Endangered puts the future in doubt because it puts familiar ideas about nature, environment, and place in doubt. Next, I look at how ecomusicology has so far managed ideas of nature and environment, especially in relation to notions of “ecological thinking,” or ecological interconnectedness. Because OOO recognizes autonomous individual things in isolation from each other, consequently, phrases like “ecological thinking,” “relational thinking,” and “holistic thinking,” which may suggest infinite or boundless interconnectedness, pose some problems.

¹²⁸ David Patrick Stearns, “Music that Changes the World—One Catacomb at a Time,” July 11, 2022, *Arts Journal*, <https://www.artsjournal.com/condemned/2022/07/music-that-changes-the-world-one-catacomb-at-a-time/>.

¹²⁹ Kate Wakeling, “Sarah Kirkland Snider: Mass for the Endangered” album review, *Classical Music*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.classical-music.com/reviews/choral-song/sarah-kirkland-snider-mass-for-the-endangered>.

¹³⁰ Steven Winn, “A Heavenly *Mass for the Endangered* From Gallicantus,” *San Francisco Classical Voice*, archived October 24, 2020, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20201024023041/https://www.sfcv.org/node/90784/workflow>.

¹³¹ Winn, “A Heavenly *Mass for the Endangered* From Gallicantus.”

¹³² Morton, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” 179–93. This is what leads Morton to infer that “the best environmental art is deconstructed from the inside. As theory it retains its fullest existence as questioning.” Morton, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” 186.

Ecological thinking

Harman has argued against contemporary trends to see everything as connected, and to “sing the praises of interconnectivity.”¹³³ For the object-oriented thinker, what is interesting is why *certain things* are connected rather than others.¹³⁴ Regarding interconnectedness, Morton asks: “Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom?”¹³⁵ Elsewhere, they write that “while ecological criticism appears to celebrate interconnectedness, it must in the end pay attention to what precisely is interconnected with what.”¹³⁶ At the same time, they refer to the ecological thought as “a radical openness to everything.”¹³⁷ Through the lens of OOO, “everything” refers to the strange irreducibility of finite objects. The ecological thought is helpfully understood as an object as opposed to a practice or process, a gateway object to ecological awareness that is radically open to the finitude of objects. This openness is what gives way to dark ecology.

Within ecomusicology *environment* typically refers to the nonhuman physical world and *nature* either refers to the reality of the natural world or cultural constructions of that concept.¹³⁸ Both imply *place*, somewhere lived and experienced (usually by humans).¹³⁹ Meanwhile,

¹³³ Harman, “Everything is Not Connected,” in *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Zer0 Books, 2013).

¹³⁴ Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 201.

¹³⁵ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 12. Morton refers to their own idea of interconnectedness as *the mesh*. Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 15 and 28–38.

¹³⁶ Morton, “Here Comes Everything,” 185.

¹³⁷ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 15.

¹³⁸ This mirrors British philosopher Kate Soper’s distinction between nature without scare quotes and “nature” (with scare quotes), respectively. Kate Soper, *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics, and the Nonhuman* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995). Allen presents a guide for these terms in Allen, “Colloquy: Ecomusicology: Ecocriticism and Musicology,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): 391–424.

¹³⁹ Pedelty asserts that to “study music ecologically, it is necessary to consider connections between sound, people, and place.” Pedelty, *Ecomusicology*, 12. Modern scholarly interest in the concepts of space and place date back at least to the 1970s. Yi-Fu Tuan’s *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (University of Minnesota Press, 1977) is a formative text.

“ecological thinking” refers to an epistemological mode that is sensitive to thinking interconnectedness alongside ideas of nature and environment.¹⁴⁰ In the editorial for an early issue of ecomusicological scholarship, David Ingram declares that music “warrants ecocritical study not least because it has become an important way of imagining notions of ecological interconnectedness.”¹⁴¹ *Ecological* interconnectedness has something to do with ideas of nature and environment. As a mode of knowledge, ecological thinking entails undermining and overmining, the two forms of knowledge that are, as Taxier puts it, “invoked to systematically *eliminate* objects.”¹⁴² Paradoxically, the objects under attack by ecological thinking are nature and environment. Ecological thinking ends up getting in its own way.

By focusing on (inter)related entities, ecological thinking risks reducing nature and environment to their constituent elements (undermining). Likewise, by focusing on the connections between those elements, ecological thinking risks reducing nature and environment to relations and effects (overmining). Titon, for instance, advocates for a more holistic ecological conception of nature as a set of interconnected relationships in what he refers to as a “relational epistemology,” a way of knowing that moves beyond economic rationality and scientific reductionism regarding nature, with the aim of establishing “an ecomusicological construction of nature worth having.”¹⁴³ Morton primarily targets Romantic ideas of nature and environment as

¹⁴⁰ One detailed formulation of “ecological thinking” is by the Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code in her book *Ecological Thinking* where she uses the phrase to refer to an “alternative epistemology” (alternative to “epistemologies of mastery”) or a “reconfiguration of epistemology altogether.” Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford University Press: 2006). See also Dianne Chisholm, “The Art of Ecological Thinking: Literary Ecology,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 18 no. 3 (Summer 2011): 569–593.

¹⁴¹ David Ingram, “Editorial,” *Green Letters* 15, issue 1 (2011): 5–7.

¹⁴² Taxier, “Object-Oriented Musicology,” 22.

¹⁴³ Titon, “The Nature of Ecomusicology,” 8 and 16. This essay was republished in Titon, *Toward A Sound Ecology: New and Selected Essays* (Indiana University Press, 2020). See also Titon, “Eco-Trope or Eco-Tripe?” in Allen and Titon, *Sounds, Ecologies, Musics*, 281–99. The musicologist Kinnear takes a similar position when he argues that

independent, definable objects *somewhere over there*, ideas that contemporary conceptions of ecological thinking reinforce by placing nature and environment elsewhere.¹⁴⁴ *Ecology without nature* also means *ecology without place*, or ecology that recognizes the irreducibility of objects, including nature and environment.¹⁴⁵ In any case, Morton's work shows how "ecological thinking" can transcend a mere approach to knowledge.

In one essay, Allen avoids the emphasis on nature and environment implied by the adverbial use of ecology and defines thinking ecologically as thinking "in connected ways that follow and allow for complex interdependencies."¹⁴⁶ An obvious problem with this definition is that "thinking ecologically" may include something like filling out a difficult crossword puzzle. But perhaps the most significant challenge facing definitions of ecological thinking is their tendency towards correlationism, or what Morton calls "anthropocentrism in philosophical form," wherein nature and environment only exist in relation to (human) minds or language.¹⁴⁷ A more ecological conception of ecological thinking, then, would delete the anthropocentrism that usually comes attached to ideas of nature and environment. From a philosophical standpoint, starting from a flat ontology is an effective way forward. As Morton discovers, a flat ontology also involves reimagining the "thinking" part of "ecological thinking."

music is effective at presenting nature as a process (overmining). Kinnear's position is that nature is not *a thing*; nature may, however, be *a network of things* (duomining). Kinnear, "Music in Nature, Nature in Music."

¹⁴⁴ Morton, "John Clare's Dark Ecology," 180. "The word *environment* still haunts us," Morton writes, "because in a society that took care of its surroundings in a more comprehensive sense, our idea of environment would have withered away." Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 141. Ideas like place, Morton notes, "entail subject positions—'places' from which Romantic ideas of place make sense." Morton, "John Clare's Dark Ecology," 179.

¹⁴⁵ Accordingly, Morton attempts to formulate an object-oriented conception of place: Morton, "John Clare's Dark Ecology," 180.

¹⁴⁶ Allen, "Ecomusicology: Bridging the Sciences, Arts, and Humanities" in *Environmental Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, ed. Deborah Rigling Gallagher (Sage Publications, 2012), 373–81.

¹⁴⁷ Morton, "Here Comes Everything," 164.

Finally, scholars often invoke ecological thinking to express a desire for greater sensitivity to ecological crises; to align the politics of ecocriticism with an aesthetic sensibility that is ecocentric (non-anthropocentric).¹⁴⁸ To that end, it would be productive to approach ecological thinking through the branch of philosophy known as aesthetics. Fortunately, Morton has made considerable progress here already. Alongside OOO, Morton has established that causality, the central theme of OOO, is wholly an aesthetic phenomenon.¹⁴⁹ In this view, thought is a derivative of a “physical” process in which all objects are involved: attunement.¹⁵⁰ A more ecological conception of ecological thinking would include humans and nonhumans within its orbit by recognizing “thinking” as a practical substitute for something like “experience.” Morton often understands thinking in this way. Ecological awareness may therefore be understood as a derivative of objects attuning to one another.

Dark ecology is ecological awareness that is not only radically *open* but also radically *deep*. It is a descent “into” the ecological thought that traverses through three zones, each one

¹⁴⁸ Allen refers to ecocentrism as non-anthropocentrism and recognizes that “proclaiming ecocentrism is itself anthropocentric.” Allen, “Diverse Ecomusicologies: Making a Difference with the Environmental Liberal Arts,” in *Performing Environmentalisms: Expressive Culture and Ecological Change*, eds. John Holmes McDowell, Katherine Borland, Rebecca Dirksen, and Sue Tuohy (University of Illinois Press, 2021), 89–116. OOO rejects correlationism and so gives new meaning to ecocentrism.

¹⁴⁹ Morton, *Realist Magic*. From an object-oriented viewpoint, the significance of relations belongs to the future. This has at least one major implication for art: the “meaning” of art belongs to the future, an idea Morton derives from Percy Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*. Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry.” See also Morton, *Realist Magic*, 90–92.

¹⁵⁰ On attunement, see Morton, “Attune” in *Veer: A Companion of Environmental Thinking* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 151–167. Attunement is synonymous with what Morton calls *ecognosis* in *Dark Ecology*: “Ecognosis is like knowing, but more like letting be known. It is something like coexisting. It is like becoming accustomed to something strange, yet it is also becoming accustomed to strangeness that doesn’t become less strange through acclimation.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5. Also compare Morton’s description of attunement to Harman’s description of *sincerity* (in footnote 18): “Since a thing cannot be known directly or totally, one can only attune to it, with greater or lesser degrees of intimacy. Nor is this attunement a ‘merely’ aesthetic approach to a basically blank extensional substance. Since appearance can’t be peeled decisively from the reality of a thing, attunement is a living, dynamic relation with another being—it doesn’t stop.” Morton, *Being Ecological*, 89. *Attunement* and *ecognosis* may also be compared to OOO’s understanding of *theatrical enactment* since the latter is not something that occurs by prior choice and it involves the creation of a new object—a “cell” or “attachment” entity. Harman, *Art and Objects*, 173–75.

further down than the last. Dark ecology is first “dark-depressing,” then it is “dark-uncanny,” and finally, it is “dark-sweet.”¹⁵¹ The order here reflects a progression from caring (about coexistence, the ecological crisis we find ourselves in, endangered species, and nonhumans in general), to acknowledging the irreducible strangeness of things (the impossibility of ever directly encountering those things), to a kind of intimacy with things that makes thinking itself ecological, thinking that turns in on itself (to acknowledge its own nonhuman status).¹⁵² I trace how Snider’s *Mass* traverses all three of these zones, although not neatly in that exact order. “Dark-ecological listening,” the interpretive mode that informs my commentary, does not necessarily adhere to the kinds of listening that conform to pre-established large-scale formal patterns. To support my claim that the ecological thought belongs to Snider’s *Mass* requires an indirect approach. It involves listening and thinking (both of which constitute tuning) *down* the musical work.

Object-oriented music criticism

It is important to address a few aspects of object-oriented aesthetic interpretation: specifically, how it differs from more standard or traditional formalist approaches, how it understands extra-musical content within a musical work, and the role of the listener in relation to the musical work *qua* art. I will touch on how OOO deals with each of these topics in turn here. This section serves as a necessary introduction for my analytical and interpretive comments and as a reference for the next two chapters. I will occasionally return to these topics throughout the other two chapters.

¹⁵¹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5

¹⁵² Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 158.

It will be helpful to survey the landscape of formalism from the perspective of OOO, especially because it deviates from the lens of traditional formalism in at least three important ways. First, it rejects the Kantian notion of autonomy, which involves the asymmetrical division of reality into two taxonomical zones, one human and the other world.¹⁵³ This division, which Harman refers to as the taxonomic fallacy, entails ascribing two different ontological structures to two separate *kinds* of beings.¹⁵⁴ As a violation of flat ontology, OOO rejects it outright.¹⁵⁵ The autonomous unit of aesthetics, then, is the hybrid entity comprised of beholder and artwork.

The second problem OOO finds with formalism is its proclivity for holism, or “overstating the mutual interdependence of the various individual elements of any given work.”¹⁵⁶ Once an artwork has been sealed off from its surrounding sociopolitical, biographical, or economic context, the formalist critic turns the interior of the work into a “holistic hall of mirrors.”¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, each song in a song cycle gains its meaning from the total context of the cycle, or a passage in Snider’s *Mass* only acquires affective power from the passages surrounding it. For OOO, various parts and features of a work may be removed without sacrificing that work’s overall individuality. What is interesting for the object-oriented thinker are those parts that the work cannot do without.

¹⁵³ Harman, “Three Problems of Formalism,” 201.

¹⁵⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 115–116.

¹⁵⁵ Harman writes: “OOO does not see flat ontology as an absolute good. Briefly put flat ontology is a good starting point for philosophy but a disappointing finish. [...] If we imagine that after fifty years of philosophizing a OOO thinker were to say nothing more than ‘humans, animals, inanimate matter and fictional characters all equally exist’, then not much progress would have been made.” Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 55–56.

¹⁵⁶ Harman, “Three Problems of Formalism,” 201–202.

¹⁵⁷ Harman, “Three Problems of Formalism,” 201–202.

The third problem is formalism's exclusion of the world outside the artwork from the beholder's experience of that work. This does not mean that *all* aspects of an artwork's environment are reflected in it, however. A beholder's imagination may run wild with interpretive ideas about a given work, but the independent reality of that work does not change or obtain new parts as a result. A separate but important point, already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter but worth reiterating here, is that OOO recognizes art as a form of cognition *without* knowledge. In short, OOO understands art as something that is capable of bringing objects into focus without reducing them in either of the two mining directions.

Regarding flat ontology: as a starting point, flat ontology entails avoiding the assumption that "any ontological distinction must be embodied in specific *kinds* of entities."¹⁵⁸ The object-oriented critic would, for example, reject the claim that a totally serialized composition is an autonomous musical work (e.g., absolute music) and one that engages with contemporary environmental topics like global warming is a context-oriented one (e.g., programmatic music).¹⁵⁹ Despite its focus on the self-enclosed musical work, object-oriented criticism is "flexible in admitting supposedly contextual elements for treatment as part of the aesthetic experience."¹⁶⁰ A context-oriented approach to *Mass for the Endangered* may claim that the ecological thought couples with a listener's experience of the Mass insofar as the musical work belongs to the same period of early 2010s environmental discourse that gave rise to Morton's monograph. From an object-oriented standpoint, however, the Mass may contain the ecological

¹⁵⁸ Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer," 189.

¹⁵⁹ Taxier notes: "[C]ritics who draw on a distinction between autonomous and context-oriented works risk the taxonomic fallacy when they allot those structures to specific *kinds* of works or contexts." Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology," 156. If the ecological thought resides within Snider's *Mass*, then it is not to be found in any specific kind of content (the libretto, for instance).

¹⁶⁰ Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology," 13.

thought within its form through its aesthetic handling of that object.¹⁶¹ For any contextual or conceptual element to enter an artwork, it must “clear a certain hurdle,” which OOO identifies as the tension between a real object and its sensual qualities.¹⁶² Some moments in the *Mass* literalize concern for nonhuman things: for instance, during the music video for the third movement when drops of oil pollute an oceanic environment to the sung text “poison, parch, pollute.”¹⁶³ Such moments fail to draw out the particular ways that the *Mass* stylizes that concern. Sporadically, the *Mass* alludes to that concern in non-literal fashion. Following the passage just mentioned, the phrase *alleluia* occurs in a decidedly unorthodox manner, as an expression of grief rather than celebration.

The principle of flat ontology insists that “philosophy should initially be agnostic about what is real and, by analogy, that the critic should initially be agnostic about what belongs to the musical form.”¹⁶⁴ Because environmental issues comprise the overarching theme of Snider’s *Mass*, one may reasonably expect it to incite some kind of ecological awareness, especially given the general gravity of the work. Because Morton identifies the ecological thought as *the* object responsible for ecological awareness, I trace the origin of that awareness to the listener’s theatrical enactment of that object. This claim, that *Mass for the Endangered* encompasses the ecological thought through its non-literal treatment of that object, is both interpretive and ontological in a speculative sense. The ecological thought may be regarded as a significant object within the self-enclosed work and responsible for much of its affective power. Again, any

¹⁶¹ Taxier, “Object-Oriented Musicology,” v.

¹⁶² Harman, *Art and Objects*, 34.

¹⁶³ Beginning at 1:06 in the music video. Nonesuch Records, “Sarah Kirkland Snider - Alleluia (Official Video),” YouTube video, September 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_E_NeTpdImY.

¹⁶⁴ Taxier, “Object-Oriented Musicology,” 179.

musical work that features this object as a significant part of its form may be categorized as what this project calls ecological music, which means that works that are not explicitly environmentally oriented may be included in this category. The next section involves an object-oriented approach to aesthetic interpretation that explores the particular ways in which one musical work stylizes the ecological thought and attends to how that object contributes to the work's autonomous musical form.

As already covered, Harman uses metaphor to demonstrate theatricality: "Metaphor," he writes, "and with it all other aesthetic experience, is strange in the sense that the object it creates is real rather than sensual."¹⁶⁵ Again, taking Homer's "wine-dark sea" as an example, Harman notes: "The Homeric sea, when described as 'wine-dark,' is so out of joint with wine that it is no longer the sensual sea of everyday experience and literal language. The sea is now withdrawn and mysterious, orbited by sensuous wine-qualities."¹⁶⁶ In this case, the sea object withdraws from all literal access and *would* leave behind disembodied wine-dark qualities if it were not for the fact that qualities cannot exist without an object. It is the beholder who enacts the qualities, who "poses" as the sea-object. Harman notes: "If I do not step in and attempt the electrifying work of becoming the [object] for the [qualities], then no metaphor occurs. This might happen for any number of reasons, including the poor quality of the metaphor, the obtuseness of the beholder, or even the boredom or distractedness of the [beholder]. The successful metaphor [...] will only occur when the reader or auditor is sincerely deployed in living it."¹⁶⁷ It should be clear

¹⁶⁵ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 68–69.

¹⁶⁶ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 68.

¹⁶⁷ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 87.

from this example that if Snider's *Mass* causes concern for nonhuman things in its listener, then it is because that listener is engaged in living that concern in some non-literal fashion.

Dark-ecological listening

Mass for the Endangered begins with a low D played by the contrabass (Figure 2). The note hums along almost inaudibly, like ambient noise in the background. The three-note motive in the piano ostinato, which evokes the intonation of a question, is likely the first thing that the listener notices.¹⁶⁸ Like a specter, the low D haunts the more immediately perceptible parts. Occasionally those parts stop and its presence enters the foreground. Movement and stillness, background and

¹⁶⁸ Listeners are likely to hear a six-note figure. Indeed, one concertgoer describes it as “a haunting six-note motif.” Jon Sobel, “Concert Review (NYC): ‘Mass for the Endangered’ by Sarah Kirkland Snider at the Green-Wood Cemetery Catacombs, Brooklyn (14 June 2022)” *Blogcritics*, June 17, 2022, <https://blogcritics.org/concert-review-nyc-mass-endangered-sarah-kirkland-snider-green-wood-cemetery-catacombs/>. I attribute its questioning character to the rising sixth-falling step motion; in measure 2, E-C-B. The tetrachord on which the ostinato is built (B-C-D-E) does not itself have the same effect.

FIGURE 2: The first page of the full score.¹⁶⁹

Commissioned by Trinity Wall Street

MASS FOR THE ENDANGERED

1. Kyrie

Pensive, with understated urgency
♩ = 48

Sarah Kirkland Snider
(2018, rev. 2019)

Nathaniel Bellows/
traditional

Revised 10/19
SCORE IN C

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¹⁶⁹ Snider, *Mass for the Endangered*, full score (G. Schirmer, 2018), 1.

foreground, flip into one another.¹⁷⁰ Dark ecology recognizes the spectral nature of withdrawnness: things are both “real” (there) and “unreal” (not-there) simultaneously. The phrase *Kyrie eleison* comes in fragments—it is sung completely just once during the beginning of the movement in an agitated and anxious manner (0:36–0:56).¹⁷¹ The score indicates that the piano ostinato should be played “sempre non-rubato; very even and steady, like a Swiss clock.”¹⁷² Syncopation and asymmetrical phrases, however, mean everything sounds as if it is continually getting stuck and restarting. Timbrally, rhythmically, and motivically, the beginning of Snider’s *Mass* feels constrained. Hesitancy and uncertainty characterize the first minute of the work.

With the string quartet that takes over at 1:39, the timbral range of the *Mass* suddenly expands, and with this expansion comes an impression that the music has opened up.¹⁷³ The harmonic rhythm accelerates in an uninterrupted stream of four-part polyphonic writing, and with the addition of a new triplet figure, this passage quickly expands the variety of both harmonic and rhythmic material. Then, unexpectedly, all four vocal parts enter together in dramatic fashion (2:03)—the music opens up completely (Figure 3). It is here that the first

¹⁷⁰ Morton, “Spectral Life,” 271–93. Morton calls this “the dark-ecological loop: [a strange loop] in which two levels that appear utterly separate flip into one another.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 7.

¹⁷¹ Gallicantus & Gabriel Crouch, *Sarah Kirkland Snider: Mass for the Endangered*, Nonesuch, 2020, compact disc. All timestamps refer to this recording. References to the score use measure numbers and rehearsal letters (for example, m. 1 and reh. G1). The performance indication “pensive, with understated urgency” appears in what I refer to as the first section of the *Kyrie* (measures 1–31). The full score is available to view here: <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/58208/Mass-for-the-Endangered--Sarah-Kirkland-Snider/>. All measure numbers and rehearsal markings mentioned here refer to the full score.

The only instruments present during this first section are the contrabass, piano, harp, and voices from a divided choir. Without the rapid crescendo to fortissimo in measures 17–19 and the sudden dynamic drop in measure 20, the effect of this passage is lost.

¹⁷² Snider, *Mass for the Endangered*.

¹⁷³ Reh. D in the score, marked “warm and expressive.”

FIGURE 3: The sudden entrance of all four vocal parts at 2:03 (reh. E).¹⁷⁴

6

1. Kyrie

44

Fl.

Ob.

Bs Cl.

Bn.

Vib.

Hp.

Pno.

S.

A.

T.

B.

Vn. I

Vn. II

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

E

p

f

mp

mf cresc.

f

pp

f

p

pp

f

p

pp

f

f

On Earth,

On Earth,

On Earth,

On Earth,

E

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¹⁷⁴ Snider, *Mass for the Endangered*, 6.

English stanza by Bellows begins: “On earth, air, and water / Have mercy / On stone, tree, and flower / Have mercy, world have mercy.” The text here gestures towards the classical elements supposed to constitute Nature, towards the objects that it contains. This appeal to the world is the final stage in a long process of zooming out. The path to the first stanza, its preparation and its own musical handling, reflects the phenomenology of dark ecology. The beginning of Snider’s *Mass* is first ominous, then strangely comforting, and finally solemn. In the span of two minutes, the first movement moves from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, from the narrow vision of a human plea for mercy to a perspective that seems to make that plea obsolete. The effect *feels like* the kind of ecological awareness Morton attributes to the ecological thought—a feeling of opening with a touch of melancholy.

Generally speaking, object-oriented interpretive analysis seeks to uncover the individual reality of the work or object in question—what makes something *that particular* thing. Because OOO denies any form of direct access to the reality of things, when it comes to getting a hold of that reality, indirect discourse provides the best way forward.¹⁷⁵ Beyond the sort of indirect approach taken above regarding the existence of the ecological thought in the *Mass*, what else might dark-ecological listening entail?

Object-oriented criticism of any kind favors countermethods, counterfactuals, and what Harman calls “countercompositionals.”¹⁷⁶ Counterfactuals help one appreciate the reality of a thing by imagining that thing inhabiting other situations or having other effects than it currently has, or may reasonably be expected to have. Harman writes: “Counterfactuals do indirect labor

¹⁷⁵ Harman notes: “When it comes to grasping reality, illusion and innuendo are the best we can do.” Harman, *Weird Realism*, 64.

¹⁷⁶ Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duomining: A Critique,” in *The Graham Harman Reader*, 11–16 and Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism,” in *The Graham Harman Reader*, 325–47.

by alluding to the elusive reality of the object apart from its relations.”¹⁷⁷ One might draw attention to the modest impact *Mass for the Endangered* has made on contemporary classical music or contemporary environmental discourse by imagining it as the most successful concert work composed since the turn of the century. Alternatively, countercompositionals can help one appreciate the reality of a thing by imagining that thing composed of different elements.¹⁷⁸ For example, the passage in which the voices sing *alleluia* for the first time (1:48 in the recording) is effectively ruined by changing E $\flat$ to E $\sharp$ —its unsettling and nervous character is replaced by something more tranquil, reminiscent of a refrain in popular music, especially when heard against the gloomy passages that precede it (Figure 4).¹⁷⁹ Snider remarked: “There are certain things that I do in the Mass [...] that you don’t really hear in any other contemporary choral music and those are the things that are coming from pop music.”¹⁸⁰ To my ear, hearing this

¹⁷⁷ Taxier, “Object-Oriented Musicology,” 134.

¹⁷⁸ Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, Duomining,” 15–16.

Harman notes that “some of the traits of a thing are clearly inessential and can be modified or removed at will without destroying the object. And even those that may be essential, to the thing do not in any individual case constitute its full reality as one thing, and therefore their exact relation to that thing poses a genuine philosophical problem. Yet there is another sense in which they must certainly belong to the thing, or we would not call them features of that thing in the first place.” Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 149. This passage once again articulates an important truth about objects according to OOO: objects are both themselves (withdrawn) and not-themselves (their parts, appearances, effects) simultaneously.

¹⁷⁹ Harman refers to this method as ruination. Harman, *Weird Realism*, 49–52. Another example: The very beginning of the Kyrie—its urgent, hesitant, and uncertain character—may be effectively ruined in at least three ways. Perhaps the easiest way is to imagine that the piano ostinato continues throughout measures 4–6. In this case, the ostinato would not recede into a background and the disquieting effect of the incomplete utterance of the Latin phrase would be lost. Because that alteration would require omitting the eighth rest in measure 6 for the sake of rhythmic continuity, this suggests a second way of ruining the first thirty seconds of the movement: By truncating measure 6 so that the voices can pronounce the third syllable of Kyrie (*-e*) with the downbeat of measure 7, the ostinato no longer regains its independence as it returns to the foreground. A third way would be to totally omit measures 4–6 so that the first entrance of the voices takes place at measure 10, now measure 8, which would generate a more predictable symmetrical phrase structure.

¹⁸⁰ Snider, “2019 September 30.”

FIGURE 4: Alleluia. Proposed countercompositional features E $\sharp$ instead of E $\flat$ (Vn. II).¹⁸¹

3. Alleluia

51

46

Fl. $mp \rightarrow ppp$

Ob. $mp \rightarrow ppp$

Bb Cl. $mp \rightarrow ppp$

Bn. $mp \rightarrow ppp$

Vib.

Hp.

Pno.

S.

A.

T. mp
Al-le lu - ia Al-le lu - ia O Al-le lu - ia

B. p
Al-le lu - ia Al-le lu - ia O Al-le lu - ia

G1

Vn. I arco pp f pp f pp

Vn. II pp f pp f pp

Va. arco pp f pp f pp

Vc.

Cb.

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¹⁸¹ Snider, *Mass for the Endangered*, 51.

proposed countercompositional draws attention to the influence of popular music in the passage.¹⁸² This E $\sharp$ version could fit easily into the chorus of a twenty-first-century pop, indie, or alternative rock song. Moreover, this countercompositional draws attention to the fact that the effect of the passage seems to hinge on a single note, which in turn draws attention to its fragility. Fragile is an apt label for a passage that works to inspire the sense of awe one might experience reflecting on the dramatic impact of anthropogenic effects on the planet.

If one only ever discusses what music *does* then one inevitably excludes what it *might be able to do*, which is more interesting from an object-oriented perspective. Indirect discourse and countermethods play a central role in object-oriented interpretive analysis. The examples above mainly serve to guide the reader's understanding of the ensuing vignettes. I do not adhere strictly to countermethods in my commentary, but I support my claim that the ecological thought belongs to the Mass by describing how the work stylizes that object, which constitutes an indirect approach. If Snider's *Mass* causes concern for nonhuman things, speculation about the status of Nature in the twenty-first century, or anxiety about the future of the planet, it is because its beholder is engaged in living the reality of those topics in some non-literal fashion, reconciling dark ecological qualities to the ecological thought. Dark-ecological listening involves identifying those surprising moments of a work that ask for one to enact some new or other reality. It involves speculation about the reality of a work, which ultimately directs one's attention to the future.

¹⁸² Snider remarks in one interview: "When I was writing the Mass, I noticed myself doing certain things that felt 'poppy'—a melodic line that reminded me of something Joni Mitchell or Sufjan Stevens might sing; references to verse-chorus song structure (like the Alleluia, and moments in the Agnus Dei)." Bunce, "An Analysis and Conductor's Guide," 62.

Dark-depressing

At the end of *Dark Ecology*, Morton discusses several different layers (zones) of ecological awareness.¹⁸³ The names of the three zones are initially misleading. They encompass the experience of more than just the adjectives attached to them. The first zone, “dark-depressing,” is host to several related qualities: abjection, anxiety, guilt, shame, melancholy, and horror, to name a few. In the adjectival sense, “depressing” may be understood as a placeholder for these and other like qualities.¹⁸⁴ (As a passing observation, in true OOO fashion, while each of the three zones may be characterized by its own collection of affective experiences, they remain irreducible to any such collection.) Ecological awareness is dark-depressing because it moves one further *down* into (one of) the two other zones. “Depression is the inner footprint of coexistence,” Morton evocatively writes, “a highly sensitive attunement to other beings, a feeling of being sensitized to a plenitude of things. De-pressed by them.”¹⁸⁵ Morton verbifies the *feeling* of depression, of *being depressed*, by referring to the origins of that feeling, the causal effects of some other object or, in this case, a profusion of objects.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 129–58.

¹⁸⁴ Snider has stated publicly that she has been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and clinical depression four or five times: Sarah Kirkland Snider, “Sarah Kirkland Snider: Illuminating Anxiety, Creative Process & Nurturing Support - w/ Julia Adolphe,” interview by Julia Adolphe, YouTube, March 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pj3eJeGfvs>. This fact is coincidental. As a matter of course, I adopt Morton’s understanding of depression in *Dark Ecology* for the sake of theoretical consistency, not to shed light on any clinical understanding of depression.

Musicologist Jessica Holmes has recently addressed representations of depression in contemporary popular music. Holmes considers depression “an aesthetic category dividing along generational, gendered, and racial lines,” all the while acknowledging that “while there are merits to unmooring depression from the exclusive purview of clinical psychology and psychiatry in these ways, there is an equally prominent concern that it undermines the value of professional diagnosis and the severe psychological distress that clinical depression entails.” Jessica A. Holmes, “Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 785–829.

¹⁸⁵ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 129.

¹⁸⁶ From Morton’s object-oriented view, causal effects are entirely aesthetic. A beholder’s experience with any object gives way to a new (even if short-lived) object (beholder-plus-object) within which that experience takes place.

To clarify what Morton means by depressing within the context of dark ecology, it is useful to differentiate between something that is *depressive* and something that is *depressing*. Something depressive elicits a feeling of despondency or hopelessness in its beholder. Morton uses the term *depressing*, however, to refer to something overwhelming or overpowering (the prefix *de-* meaning *down*), as in “being de-pressed by the overwhelming presence of processes and entities that one can’t shake off.”¹⁸⁷ The ecological message of *Mass for the Endangered* is plainly depressive: Nonhuman things are suffering due to the impact of anthropogenic effects on the planet, and it may be too late to do anything besides pay homage to them before they are gone. Descriptions of the work and its theme, the content of its libretto, even the title itself—all these things indicate that the work is, generally speaking, a depressive work.¹⁸⁸ It is depressing, though, to the extent that it successfully draws its listener into greater intimacy with the reality of those environmental issues.

A major symptom of this kind of depression is that, according to Morton, “your time window collapses to a diameter of a few minutes into the past and few minutes into the future.”¹⁸⁹ Even more dramatic would be when that time window collapses to a diameter of just a

Because direct contact with the reality of objects is impossible, that experience involves a *sensual object* and its *sensual qualities*. On the one hand, the phrase “the inner footprint of coexistence” refers to the possible multiplicity of sensual objects made contiguous by the beholder’s experience on the interior of that new object; on the other hand, it refers to the effects that take place as a result of that encounter. In both cases, the beholder’s experience involves the sensation of being overwhelmed (“de-pressed”) by the demand to coexist with so many other objects. Indeed, Morton compares the depressing quality of ecological awareness to *ennui*, the feeling of being stimulated by the boredom of being constantly stimulated, and calls *ennui* “the correct ecological attunement”: “Isn’t this just the quintessence of ecological awareness, namely the abject feeling that I am surrounded and penetrated by other entities such as stomach bacteria, parasites, mitochondria—not to mention other humans, lemurs, and sea foam? I find it slightly disgusting and yet fascinating. I am ‘bored’ by it in the sense that I find it provocative to include all the beings that I try to ignore in my awareness all the time.” Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 124–26.

¹⁸⁷ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 154.

¹⁸⁸ On the influence of titles on aesthetic experience, see Jerrold Levinson, “Titles,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 44, no. 1 (1985): 29–39.

¹⁸⁹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 113.

few seconds. As OOO understands time as something that objects emit, from an interpretive standpoint, then, there are a couple of options. The feeling of being depressed may be attributed to passages that are timbrally, texturally, or motivically dense, especially in relation to surrounding passages. Dense passages like these overwhelm the listener to the point where the listener may give up trying to parse out all the distinct parts (as sometimes happens when listening to an especially complex fugue). Accordingly, these passages create the sense that linear time is progressing quickly. Meanwhile, the opposite case would lead the listener to experience time as coming to a standstill. In both cases, the “time window” collapses for the listener. One either attempts to make sense of a profusion of objects and feels de-pressed, or one lingers in anxiety about what might happen next.¹⁹⁰ Here I focus on one section in the first movement, the first section in the Mass that I propose is dark-depressing.¹⁹¹

In the previous section, I established that the A section of the Kyrie constitutes a feeling of opening, as distinct from the impression or understanding that one is “in” an opening *section*, which does not necessarily entail that same feeling. Here, I propose that the B section is the focal point of the movement—not for structural reasons, but because it is the first section of the Mass that obliges one to genuinely care about its topic. The B section contains more than two-thirds of the text of the entire movement. Its musical handling of this text is why the section is dark-depressing.¹⁹² Listeners either strive to make sense of the text and, in failing to do so, become

¹⁹⁰ These remarks suggest an understanding of tempo through the lens of OOO. Yves Klein’s *Monotone Symphony* feels long at twenty minutes because it is limited to whatever qualities a D major chord possesses. Meanwhile, a Brandenburg Concerto, of approximately the same length, may fly by, leaving its listener wishing they could hear it again.

¹⁹¹ Two other relevant passages include approximately 3:30–4:00 in the Gloria and approximately 2:00–2:45 in the Credo. In both, the contrapuntal texture grows denser.

¹⁹² By characterizing this section as dark-depressing I also mean to draw attention to a variety of effects that the passage harbors, all of which that term collects, not to assert any one of those effects is predominant.

overwhelmed, or they do not, in which case the effect of the entire section is reduced to something more banal (merely developmental or contrasting).

While notions of progress, development, or achievement may align with the ecological message of the Mass, the Kyrie revolves around a plea for forgiveness and mercy for what has already been done. Dark-ecological listening offers an interpretation of the B section that approaches how it summons the listener to appreciate the gravity of the plea, which is the central focus of the movement, as well as the Mass as a whole. The B section increases the intensity of that plea, ironically, by obscuring it. Snider remarks in her interview with Bunce that “it would be instructive and helpful for conductors to spend focused time with Nathaniel’s text, since the setting of the text determined every musical decision.”¹⁹³ Through its musical handling of the text, the B section works to overwhelm or *de-press* the listener or, in other words, to make the listener *care* (more) about the message that the text conveys. A dark-ecological listening of the Kyrie subverts structural listening.

The conventionally designated B section of the first movement (2:54–4:29) begins with the second complete statement of “Kyrie eleison” (mm. 67–70, solo soprano part), which merges into the second English stanza, so that “Kyrie eleison” replaces “Give mercy.”¹⁹⁴ To illustrate the prevalence of elision and text convergence throughout this section, I have placed the text as it appears in the libretto next to my own version of the text which is meant to emulate how one is

¹⁹³ Bunce, “An Analysis and Conductor’s Guide,” 58.

¹⁹⁴ The middle section of a movement or work in ternary form necessarily features new or contrasting musical material, or dramatically develops material featured in the preceding one. While this section could be described as essentially developmental or contrasting, explaining it in terms of how it relates to the A section risks falling into a formalistic tendency that OOO rejects. On one hand, approaching it from a music-analytical standpoint to trace how it develops and transforms already existing material or presents new material would serve primarily to *undermine* it. On the other hand, approaching it from a more conventional interpretive standpoint to summarize its relation to the A section would primarily serve to *overmine* it. See Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duomining: A Critique.”

likely to perceive the musical handling of the text (2:54–3:35, mm. 71–89). Parentheses indicate text that occurs out of order (in relation to the text as it appears in the libretto) or is repeated. Bold text indicates where the text intersects with the text around it. Snider uses the underlined text for the last section of the movement. The table below (Table 1) is meant to draw attention to the difficulty of following all the text in this section. Having the libretto at hand only serves to make the experience of following along more difficult.

The text in bold receives melodic treatment while the rest of the text gradually accepts a role as accompaniment for each new melodic phrase. From approximately 3:35 and 3:40, just as the soprano line ascends on the words “boundless wonder,” is where I suspect one is likely to hear the staggered text in the lower voices fully integrated as accompaniment to the melodic phrases above it. Just as this happens, though, the treatment of the text as accompaniment ends and all vocal parts are temporarily present in a passage that features six-part polyphony (mm. 90–95). The last intelligible phrase is “give mercy.” From 3:38 on, the words become unintelligible due to the rhythmic independence of all the parts. It might be illustrated how all the parts coalesce in a single timbral stream for the listener, which reaches its breaking point with the high B in the top soprano line. Abruptly, at 3:52 (m. 96, reh. H), the alto voices begin singing a jaunty tune on the words “Not hunted, hounded, poisoned, fleeced” while the other voices repeat the word “not” in syncopated rhythm. To my ear, this short passage suggests the sort of mocking tunes children might “sing” while playing together. Whereas a more conventional structural analysis would be inclined to suggest that this mocking tune interrupts a would-be climax, a dark-ecological listening makes it clear that by this point the climactic moment has already passed. At 3:52 the music comes to a halt only if the listener is already somehow engaged in enacting the urgency of the environmental concern to which the entire section alludes. In this

TABLE 1: Text (incomplete) as published in the score (left) versus how it is set musically (right).

Kyrie Eleison	Kyrie Eleison
Give mercy to all wing and paw	on all wing, paw
Mercy to all creed and claw	all creed, claw
On flower, seed, leaf and root	
Give mercy to all broods and tribes	All broods, (Mercy on this refuge) tribes, all nests,
Mercy to all nests and prides	prides, (All wing) this braided boundless wonder
To tide and spring, squall and breeze	(paw, all creed, claw, All broods, tribes) (Give mercy
To those who plead for calm and peace	to all wing and paw) (and nests, prides, and claw)
Not hunted, hounded, poisoned, fleeced.	(Give mercy) ...
<u>To barren poisoned land</u>	
<u>Forgive us</u>	
<u>To the vanished, and the left</u>	
<u>Forgive us, world forgive us</u>	
Mercy on this refuge,	
this braided boundless stone	
Mercy for their old	
Mercy for their young	
And mercy now for what we've done	
Kyrie Eleison	

way, the mocking tune is not “about” the denial of cadential closure but is “about” the listener. After this, the final line “And mercy now for what we’ve done,” which receives no musical treatment that is particularly noteworthy, stands out more than any other part of the text—and there is the listener, caring.

Dark-uncanny

Morton suggests that ecological awareness involves an “awareness of specters.”¹⁹⁵ Given that the Mass behaves like a requiem, this description deserves some attention. Dark ecology understands ecological beings as objects that “provide insights into the weird way in which entities are riven from within between what they are and how they appear.”¹⁹⁶ In other words, ecological beings are objects in the OOO sense, entities that withdraw from any relation, even their relation to their own appearances. Morton creatively evokes the withdrawnness of objects by referring to objects as specters or spectral, terms intended to evoke a collection of ghostly features and, as a result, double the strangeness of objects.¹⁹⁷ Objects are spectral because the more we think them, “the more we discover that such beings are not solidly ‘real’ nor completely ‘unreal’” but always withdraw from our capacity to think them.¹⁹⁸ Profound ambiguity, a sense of knowing and not

¹⁹⁵ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 125.

¹⁹⁶ Morton, “Spectral Life,” 272. “Ecological beings” refers to objects with which humans coexist.

¹⁹⁷ Morton, “Spectral Life,” 271.

¹⁹⁸ Morton, “Spectral Life,” 272. In another sense, Morton also uses “spectral” to describe what they refer to elsewhere as “the aesthetic dimension.” Morton, *Realist Magic*, 18. For OOO, objects only ever encounter *sensual* versions of one another. OOO therefore insists that *causality is aesthetic* and it is that idea that guides Morton’s thoughts throughout *Realist Magic*. It is that same idea which leads Morton to assert that “if ecology names relations between beings, then these relations are spectral.” Morton, “Spectral Life,” 273. In other words, relations take place on the level of appearances. Objects undergo changes retroactively via sensual encounters with other objects. OOO calls this *vicarious causation*. For what I believe is the clearest synopsis on that topic, see Cogburn, “Editors’ Introduction,” xxii–xxv and then Harman, “On Vicarious Causation.”

knowing simultaneously, and uncertainty—these things reflect the second zone of dark ecology, where things become darkly uncanny.

The composer's description of the Mass as "a requiem for the not-yet-gone" may be read two different ways. The "not-yet-gone" are, presumably, nonhuman entities or ecological beings (ambiguity emerges when "ecological beings" encompasses humans, too). The phrase indicates that the nonhumans in the Mass may either be "not-yet-gone" in the sense that they are still with us, or "not-yet-gone" in the sense that any hope for them is a lost cause. I focus on the Credo here, which highlights this ambiguity.

The Credo is built on a five-note ground ($g^2\ b^1\ c^2\ e^2\ f\sharp^1$) adapted from Caroline Shaw's song *Cant voi l'aube* (2016). Snider remarks that she "loved the idea of honoring [the parody mass tradition] in a twenty-first-century twist, with one female composer borrowing material from another contemporaneous female composer's chanson."¹⁹⁹ The phrase "We believe in all," repeated throughout the movement, is also based on a five-note rhythmic motive (m. 19, reh. O1). The Credo emphasizes the redemption of the "not-yet-gone." Faith in the present and hope for the future are combined throughout. The voices celebrate both sentiments simultaneously at 2:53 (mm. 95–109, reh. W1). Perfect intervals, evocative of plainchant, permeate the texture (Figure 5). In the four woodwinds above, hairpin dynamics give a sense of shape and breath to the dynamically static voices, which can only declare their grief-stricken faith plangently. When asked if she borrowed any plainchant for the Mass Snider replied: "No, but I went for that a

¹⁹⁹ Bunce, "An Analysis and Conductor's Guide," 60. Shaw borrowed the poem "Cant voi l'aube dou jor venir" by the French trouvère Gace Brulé for her song. The song is a woman's song, and "one of only five extant Old French aubes, only one other of which is, like this one, complete." Samuel N. Rosenberg and Samuel Danon, eds., *The Lyrics and Melodies of Gace Brulé* (Garland, 1985), 336–37. Shaw omits the part of the poem that implies that the woman is singing to a man.

FIGURE 5: *Credo*, where perfect intervals permeate the texture.²⁰⁰

76 4. Credo

Fl. *ff* *pp* *ff* *pp* *p*

Ob. *ff* *pp* *ff* *pp* *p*

Bb Cl. *ff* *pp* *ff* *pp* *p*

Bn. *ff* *pp* *ff* *pp* *p*

Mar.

Hp.

Pno.

S. *f*
who are voice-less We be-lieve in all... help - less We be-lieve in all...

A. *f*
who are voice-less We be-lieve in all... help - less We be-lieve in all...

T. *f*
We be-lieve in all...

B. *f*
We be-lieve in all...

Vn. I *mp* *f*

Vn. II *mp* *f*

Va. *mp* *f*

Vc. *p* *f* *p* *f* *mp* *f*

Cb. *f*

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²⁰⁰ Snider, *Mass for the Endangered*, 76.

couple times. I went for the plainchant vibe [in the Credo].”²⁰¹ Starting at 6:11 (mm. 193–197) the voices sing “We believe in all who are stalwart / We believe in all who are fearless” and the Latin *Exspecto vitam venturi sæculi* (translated to English in the libretto as “And I await the life of the world to come”) at the same time. The former retains the basic five-note shape of the repeated phrase while the latter evokes the ascending stepwise motion of a plainchant melody. The Credo is a vehicle for a message of faith in Nature while recognizing that Nature is difficult to pin down. Nature, like the ecological thought, is futural, always to come.

The Mass does not depict God *as* Nature but Nature adopts God-like qualities (omnipresence and omnipotence). As ecological criticism, dark ecology resists the view that one special kind of entity is the root of all others, the view that all things are *x*, but some things are more *x* than others.²⁰² With respect to *Mass for the Endangered*, two obvious substitutes for *x* here include God or Nature. Rather than proposing a false oneness with either Nature or Nature-as-God, though, the Mass sustains a key feature of dark ecology: acknowledging gaps is actually “a paradoxical way of having greater fidelity to things.”²⁰³ The Mass maintains a critical perspective of one of the central positions it adopts: namely, that there is a gap between humans and nonhumans. While the libretto of the Mass apparently maintains a taxonomic distinction between human and nonhuman, its musical handling makes the boundary between those two categories difficult to detect. Often, the voice in the Mass may be heard as either human *or* nonhuman in origin. From an interpretive standpoint, its source is ambiguous. Until the end of the Kyrie when the chorus sings “for what we’ve done,” listeners may hear nonhumans as the

²⁰¹ Snider, “2019 September 30.”

²⁰² Morton, *Realist Magic*, 41.

²⁰³ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 142–43.

source of the plea for mercy. With that last line of the text, the listener must recognize their complicity—they can no longer deny their *own* voice.

Starting at 1:27 (measure 48, reh. R1) in the Credo, immediately after the words “Mercy, now, on all animalia,” the expansive range of the woodwinds and harp is reduced to the interval of a fourth and three pitches (B $\flat$, D $\sharp$, and E $\flat$). Two syncopated E major chords, played by the string quartet and contrabassoon, signal both the end of the first large section and the beginning of the next, and disrupt an otherwise more intimate mood. The score instructs the subsequent stanza, beginning with the words “Take no tooth or tusk, steal no heart, hair, or husk,” to be sung “with a sardonic jaunt.” Hearing the sardonic jaunt of the voices lends something to the preceding chords. The voices, as if taunting the forcefulness of the chords, avoid the conclusive-sounding E $\flat$, and primarily alternate between G $\sharp$ and B $\flat$. The chords take on the character of a protest, then, especially as they flank the Latin phrase *et vitam venturi sæculi* in measures 69–72. The “Amen” that is supposed to follow this phrase according to the traditional presentation of the text is absent. The chords do not merely interrupt but lend a crucial air of defiance to the text which in turn lends the rhythmic jabs a more aggressive, competitive character. The “voice” of the Mass can be found in the instrumental parts, too.

The Credo complicates the pronoun “we.” Bellows’s text substitutes the traditional singular “I” (in *Credo in unum Deum*) with the plural “we.” Without repetition, there would be no such thing as uncanniness. The repetition of the phrase “We believe” throughout the Credo becomes a mantra and, like a mantra, gives way to uncertainty about the meaning of the phrase—about who “we” are. Morton notes that pronouns are complicated by the ecological thought: “how many beings does *we* gather together and are they all human?”²⁰⁴ The Credo abandons the

²⁰⁴ Morton, *Being Ecological*, xvi.

singular focus of the Latin text for an ecological perspective that underscores the uncanniness of life forms.

Nature evades reduction. Morton finds that wherever we look for Nature, we encounter “a long metonymic string.”²⁰⁵ The text of the Credo alludes to nonhumans, “all who” are constituents of Nature. These nonhumans are questions, or specters—*objects* in the two worlds that the Mass envisions: the present one, and an imagined, more hopeful world to come. Listeners detect them only by way of the abject qualities attributed to them: they are “offset,” “outcast,” “voiceless,” and “stranded.” Each iteration of the Credo’s mantra, which returns as a five-note rhythmic pattern, preserves hope for them and amplifies their depressive quality of life. The “dark side” of the ecological thought is embodied in an assertion of “the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world.”²⁰⁶ Each repetition of the mantra compels the listener to reflect once more on the two distinct worlds and their inhabitants.

Especially captivating moments in the Mass are those where the text either bonds with surprising musical qualities, or the musical qualities already present with the text are severed from it.²⁰⁷ The only Latin retained for the Credo is the last line in the traditional text: *Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum, et vitam venturi sæculi*. Traditionally, this line follows acceptance of baptism for the remission of sins. Snider’s Credo disposes of sin, however, and replaces it with blind faith. The Credo offers what Morton calls “abjection without cleansing, a melancholia without mourning,” a place to recognize the depth of ecological awareness.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ “Wherever we look for [nature], we encounter just a long metonymic string of chipmunks, trees, stars, space, toothbrushes, skyscrapers...” Morton, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” 187.

²⁰⁶ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 185.

²⁰⁷ Harman suggests that there are two basic ways to capture a beholder’s attention: creating a new bond between one thing and another, or sundering an already existing bond. Harman, “Poe’s Black Cat,” 231.

²⁰⁸ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 118.

Alongside its unwavering faith in nonhumans, the Credo awaits “the life of the world to come.” “Life” here evidently refers to *future nonhumans*. The phrase also grants strength and endurance to “all who,” despite their current abject status, may at some future point in time prosper (again). Without indicating any specific nonhuman things, the features of the anticipated “world to come” fuse with “life” that is, in both cases, unknowable. The phrase “life of the world” may evoke a sense of place, too, in its original sense, as a meeting place, perhaps for both humans and nonhumans alike. By eliciting a *feeling* about nonhumans and the *feeling* of a potential future, standard impressions of nonhumans or Nature as distinguishable *things-over-there* quickly dissolve. “The ecological thought sneaks up on you from the future,” Morton reminds us, “a picture of what will have had to be there, already, for ‘ecology without nature’ to make sense.”²⁰⁹

Finally, Morton points out that to truly love nature would be to love what is non-identical with us.²¹⁰ The Credo lingers in sadness over what is non-identical to humans. The opening verses describe strange, otherworldly entities. They are “the lesser and the left”; they feature “the blessing of wing, angelic, ingenious” along with “the holy pelt and fin, hoary hide and shell.” The Credo’s message of faith is simultaneously a declaration of love for these beings whose source is “the spirit housed in the opposite” (first stanza). Morton suggests that dark-ecological love is “excessive, exuberant, and riskier than a bland extension of humanitarianism to the environment.”²¹¹ It acknowledges the irreducibility, the deep and sometimes troubling

²⁰⁹ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 3.

²¹⁰ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 185.

²¹¹ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 186.

strangeness of the beloved. It is a love for the “mute, objectified quality of the object, its radical nonidentity.”²¹²

The Credo adopts a stance toward Nature that is essentially questioning: What could, or will, Nature *be*? The mantra (“We believe...”) implies a kind of spiritual faith in the future existence of nonhumans (what Nature *will* be) but encapsulating this faith is the work’s general insistence that humans are responsible for that future (what Nature *could* be). Indeed, Morton argues that place itself is “always caught up in a certain *question*, assuming the form of a questioning, or questioning attitude.”²¹³ Nature, environment, nonhumans, place—the Credo brings the reality of these familiar things into question. It is the listener’s adoption of a questioning attitude toward those things that situates them within the second zone of dark ecology.

Dark-sweet

Listening to *Mass for the Endangered* in its entirety, one discovers that it is actually a loop, or perhaps a Möbius strip.²¹⁴ The last movement, the Agnus Dei, begins and ends just like the first movement, the Kyrie. The first two minutes of the Agnus Dei echo the first two minutes of the Kyrie in both form and content. Where there was the unexpected entrance of the string quartet in the Kyrie, in the Agnus Dei, the first verse of the English text begins: “Lamb of God, / of longing, loss, / have mercy on us” (compare 1:25–1:42 in the Kyrie to 1:33–1:55 in the Agnus Dei). If the listener anticipates the arrival of the string quartet again near the 1:50 mark, then its

²¹² Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 186.

²¹³ Morton, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” 180.

²¹⁴ Another interpretation may suggest that the Mass simulates the insidious loop of *agrilogistics*, the very thing Morton holds responsible for the Anthropocene throughout *Dark Ecology* and, consequently, the source of the problems the Mass confronts. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 39–59.

absence is unexpected. Either way, the Agnus Dei diverges from the Kyrie at that moment. The change effectively ruins the feeling of opening previously discussed and attributed to the Kyrie. Whereas the Kyrie sets the work in motion, the Agnus Dei twists the entire work back in on itself.

Both movements begin with a single sustained pitch, both feature the same piano ostinato (transposed up a whole step for the last movement), and both feature the same build-up with harp and vibraphone (compare 0:30–0:57 in the Kyrie to 0:48–1:10 in the Agnus Dei). The build-up in the Agnus Dei highlights the phrase “qui tollis peccata mundi” (“you take away the sins of the world”) and infuses it with optimism. In the Gloria, that phrase took on an ominous tone during a transitional passage (2:53–3:11, mm. 84–90). There, it is also the first phrase sung by the lower voices as the movement journeys into darker territory (Gloria, 3:20). In the Agnus Dei, its importance is greatly diminished by its singular appearance in that passage. Throughout the final movement, familiar material adopts more poignant, bittersweet qualities, even if only because one recognizes that it now belongs to the end of the work.

In *Dark Ecology*, Morton tries “to get to the third darkness, the sweet one, through the second darkness, the uncanny one.”²¹⁵ To characterize the last movement as uncanny is fairly straightforward: Things sound familiar—timbrally, dynamically, rhythmically, motivically—and unfamiliar simultaneously. A soprano sings “Agnus Dei” while material from the Kyrie lends the voice a strange, otherworldly presence (0:05–0:38). The reversal of vowel sounds (*e-i* rather than *i-e*) may also add to the effect. At the end of the movement, the flute, clarinet, and second violins play an ascending figure that recalls the one heard in the Credo (compare 5:38 in the Credo to 8:26 in the Agnus Dei). The repeated sixteenth notes played by the winds starting at 2:26 (reh.

²¹⁵ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 5.

H3, “Slightly dreamy”) recall the repeated eighth notes played by the strings in the Alleluia; the rising figure in the soprano voices at 3:08 recalls the beginning of the Sanctus (0:10–0:17), and the solo declaration of “Lamb of / God—give wonder, wish / give kindness back” that serves as a transition to the final section of the movement starting at 6:22 is comparable to the final transitional passage in the Alleluia from 2:48–3:08 where a single soprano voice declares “She who is sleeping, / Is she who will awake.” Morton describes that “third darkness” as a particular kind of longing—a bittersweet longing that is passionate, joyful, which blurs the boundary between longing and sadness. Dark-ecological sweetness is a “spiritual” version of ecological awareness where irony and sincerity intertwine.²¹⁶ The realization that one is caught in a loop and simultaneously involved in its creation is analogous to what dark ecology calls dark-sweetness.²¹⁷

The phrase “Agnus Dei” frames the final movement: it is sung at the beginning (until 1:51) and at the end (from 7:58 on). Regarding its use in the movement, Snider mentions: “Nathaniel and I [...] decided that ‘Lamb of God,’ or ‘Agnus Dei,’ would represent an actual lamb—a representative of all vulnerable, powerless nonhuman life forms on Earth.”²¹⁸ The full Latin phrase “Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi” then suggests that it is Nature or nonhuman life who “takes away the sins of the world”—an environmentalist revenge fantasy in which Nature reclaims its dominion over all things. But because the Mass complicates the boundary between humans and nonhumans and therefore what actually constitutes Nature, a more apt interpretation is that it is coexistence with all forms of life that “takes away the sins of the

²¹⁶ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 152–55.

²¹⁷ Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 155.

²¹⁸ Bunce, “An Analysis and Conductor’s Guide,” 58.

world”—a hopeful solution rather than a veiled threat. With that in mind, a listener could hear the repetition of the phrase at the end of the movement like “We” in the Credo, as a mantra that lends the phrase a layer of ambiguity. Its repetition signals not one particular “Lamb of God” but many different “lambs of god.” The phrase alludes to the innocence of all fragile life forms. Its recognition as such is joyous, sad, and hopeful.

At 4:33 (measure 95) there is a dramatic pause. Snider comments on the choral passage that immediately follows: “I wanted this particular moment of the music to celebrate and exalt the lamb—again, standing in for all of the Earth’s biodiversity—before the music gradually shifts into the more questioning, bittersweet, uncertain terrain in which the movement ends.”²¹⁹ The start of the coda (from 7:56 or from measure 162 on) signals the completion of that gradual shift. The score instructs the choir to chant “Agnus Dei” ecstatically, majestically. As if shepherding it ahead, the solo soprano voice continually sings one extra beat ahead of the chant. Because the beginning of the Agnus Dei mirrors the beginning of the Kyrie, it encourages listeners to hear the phrase “Agnus Dei” in the same vein as the phrase “Kyrie Eleison”; that is, as a solemn appeal. But the last movement achieves more than uncanniness by mirroring the first, it descends further to bittersweetness. The movement concludes with a long fade-out, which one may hear as symbolic of the gradual disappearance of endangered species.

Like the Kyrie, the Agnus Dei also concludes with a tritone (Figure 6). Snider comments: “It was important to me that the music not feel like it was wrapped up with a bow, with a sense of finality at the significant endpoints, but rather with a sense of questioning, as the music is about a dire situation on our planet that currently remains very much unresolved.”²²⁰ The long

²¹⁹ Bunce, “An Analysis and Conductor’s Guide,” 41.

²²⁰ Bunce, “An Analysis and Conductor’s Guide,” 59.

FIGURE 6: The final measures of the Mass.²²¹

6. Agnus Dei

163

192

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Bn.

Mar.

Hp.

Pno.

S.

A.

T.

B.

Vn. I

Vn. II

Va.

Vc.

Cb.

ord. #2

ppp

ppp

ppp

ppp

ppp

ppp

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²²¹ Snider, *Mass for the Endangered*, 163.

fade-out that ends the work inspires reflection on the work as a whole. One may wonder about the status of the endangered things that it mourns. Was it really a “requiem for the not-yet-gone”? Is there hope? The longing that follows the questioning feeling is analogous to the bittersweetness of dark ecology: a state of wonder whose source is longing, or attunement to an object that recedes the more one tries to grasp it. Dark-sweetness is the feeling that one is stuck in a loop that endlessly traverses sadness, longing, and joy. Morton describes the ecological thought as “intrinsically dark, mysterious, and open, like [...] an unresolved chord.”²²²

“And mercy now for what we’ve done”

Even the brightest moments of *Mass for the Endangered* are tinged with guilt, shame, and irony (for example, the end of the Sanctus/Benedictus, where ecstatic praise abruptly turns timid).

Dark ecology pervades the work to its core. Morton compares the form of dark ecology to film noir, wherein the narrator “begins investigating a supposedly external situation [...] only to discover that she or he is implicated in it.”²²³ I propose that this is analogous to a listener’s experience of the Mass. Passages throughout the work allude to external real-world ecological crises by severing components of their supposed reality (nature, environment, and nonhumans specifically) from their ordinary, expected qualities. The Mass puts the future in doubt because it puts ideas of nature, environment, and nonhumans in doubt. In short, the Mass de-literalizes its central topics. Listeners are not merely passive observers to this, but find themselves implicated

²²² Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 16.

²²³ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 16.

in it. Listeners imaginatively co-produce the environmental problems that the work addresses, executing their accompanying concern, fear, and anxiety. This is the ecological thought.²²⁴

The two questions posed at the beginning of this chapter raise two separate and related questions: What *is* ecological awareness, and where does it originate? Morton's work offers answers to both. Dark ecology describes ecological awareness in what may be the latest age of mass extinction, and from an object-oriented perspective, the ecological thought is its source. My work here demonstrates how Morton's concepts can helpfully inform ecocritical approaches to individual musical works, especially those that handle topics and themes directly tied to contemporary environmental issues. Musical works can challenge listeners to reflect on how they personally relate to environmental issues, to (re-)examine their own ideas about nature, the environment, and nonhuman things. Snider's *Mass* effectively demonstrates these points. From an object-oriented perspective, art can reveal to its beholder some previously undisclosed reality of the objects it aestheticizes. Non-literal (aesthetic) experience, exemplified by metaphor, is the foundation for discovering new and different ways of thinking about the reality of ecological crises. Morton puts this sentiment more straightforwardly: "Art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality."²²⁵ Morton's work, alongside OOO, provides the much-needed conceptual tools to discuss that fact.

²²⁴ Its presence in *Mass for the Endangered* is evidenced by its non-literal handling throughout the work. Contrary to my interpretive efforts here, one may state that a listener is already engaged in some kind of ecological awareness through basic knowledge of the work (its theme, libretto, or title). To my mind, this observation only serves to reinforce the idea that, according to Morton, ecological awareness "has a twisted, looping form." Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 6. My concern here has been how aesthetic experience in relation to a musical work makes ecological awareness possible. Ecological awareness emerges as a result of the beholder's theatrical enactment of an object that withdraws behind its perceptible qualities. A listener executes the withdrawn reality of the ecological thought by reconciling it with qualities associated with the three primary zones of dark ecology.

²²⁵ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 8.

Finally, as suggested, an object-oriented approach to interpretive musical analysis involves approaching musical works in a new light, as things that can harbor surprising perspectives on environmental topics through their non-literal handling of those topics. Approaching musical works this way involves starting from a position of radical openness, following the *feeling* of ecological awareness, of dark ecology. To that end, it may be more accurate to say that, rather than approaching musical works in a new light, object-oriented analysis in an ecocritical mode pursues objects *down* through whatever kind of darkness surrounds them. This pursuit “down” entails thinking the hidden reality of objects, otherwise known as their future. For the object-oriented ecomusicologist, this involves being ecological in a very active sense—“acknowledging in a deep way the existence of beings that aren’t you, with whom you co-exist.”²²⁶

²²⁶ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 79.

CHAPTER 2: Sublime Objects: Caroline Shaw's *The Evergreen*

“Music, on its best days, can re-arrange your sense of the scale of time, the distance between your heart and your brain, and the distance between yourself and other people.”²²⁷

Introduction

The Evergreen (2020) is Caroline Shaw's seventh work for string quartet.²²⁸ Shaw was inspired to compose *The Evergreen* following a walk in an evergreen forest on Swiikw (Galiano Island) in British Columbia one day in January 2020. Two months later, she wrote the following introductory note to the full score:

This piece, *The Evergreen*, is my offering to one particular tree in that forest. I started writing music years ago as gifts for people (whether they knew it or not), or as companions to a piece of art or food or idea. It was a way of having someone hold my hand through the writing process, a kind of invisible friend to guide me through. This tree is towering, craggy, warped and knotted wrapped in soft green, standing silently in a small clearing where the shadows are more generous to the narrow streams of sunlight that try to sneak up in late morning. To be honest, I'm not entirely sure that it's still alive, or that it's actually an ancient deciduous tree that has tacitly agreed to be covered in moss. But still, it feels like an evergreen friend, and so I wrote some music for it and have called it *The Evergreen*. For the soft moss that covers it, for its strong stem that reaches up, for

²²⁷ Caroline Shaw, “Ochre (2022) by Caroline Shaw - Cantori New York commission,” YouTube video, 00:29, February 24, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CizL60cZGEQ>.

²²⁸ *The Evergreen* follows *Punctum* (2009–2013), *Entr'acte* (2011), *Valencia* (2012), *Plan & Elevation: The Grounds of Dumbarton Oaks* (2015), *Blueprint* (2016), and *Three Essays for String Quartet* (2016–2018). Shaw stated in an interview: “My home zone is really the string quartet. It's what I fell in love with when I was ten or eleven, and it's what I love to do with other people—that kind of music-making. It's really fun to go into early repertoire and rip it up and make something new out of it.” Anna Lapwood: “Anna Lapwood: In Conversation with Caroline Shaw,” YouTube video, 5:45, September 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=az86IvB5ZtY>.

Shaw's music has been the topic of a few recent publications within music studies: Owen Belcher, “Caroline Shaw's Musical Portraits,” *Theory and Practice* 45 (2020): 1–50; Joshua Harper, “Drawing the Line: Caroline Shaw's Use of Baroque Dance Forms in *Partita for 8 Voices*,” *The Choral Scholar & American Choral Review* 58, no. 3 (2020): 26–49 and Sara Haefeli, “Music as Communal Practice and the Problem of White Joy in Caroline Shaw's *Partita for 8 Voices*,” *Contemporary Music Review* 41, nos. 2–3 (2022): 234–53.

the gentle chaos of the dripping water that surrounds it, and for the roots below, ever seeking and nourishing and building.²²⁹

In 2022, Shaw posted the following statement on the homepage of her official website alongside an announcement for the release of the Attaca Quartet's album *Evergreen* (2022): "I hope that listening to this record is like walking through the forest floor from an ant's perspective, looking up at the surrounding moss, water, and wood in all its patient, nourishing, strange complexity."²³⁰ Each movement of the quartet features a descriptive title: "Moss," "Stem," "Water," and "Root." Rather than directly depicting its eponymous object, the work invites listeners to linger over that object's constituent parts. The evergreen itself is never directly depicted or present. Instead, listeners encounter discrete objects one-by-one which ultimately give them the impression that they have encountered some other, encompassing object to which all of those parts belong, an object withdrawn from its own parts and appearances. In other words, listeners encounter or discover the evergreen obliquely through the cumulative effect of four distinct musical experiences.

The work raises questions about how music mediates encounters with nonhuman things and how those encounters may be theorized. The previous chapter highlighted some of the principles of OOO alongside two of Morton's most influential conceptual tools and how they may be brought to bear on interpretive musical analysis in the ecocritical mode. Theatricality hovered in the background but here takes on a more important role. I primarily aim to characterize the four objects that *The Evergreen* depicts, in particular the evergreen itself, which

²²⁹ Shaw, *The Evergreen*, full score (Caroline Shaw Editions, 2020).

²³⁰ Shaw, "Caroline Shaw | Music," archived June 19, 2023, via the Wayback Machine, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230619000144/https://carolineshaw.com/>. At the time, Shaw's website also operated as her personal blog. The album (which received the Grammy Award for "Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance" in 2023) features six other works by Shaw, none of which have any conceptual resemblance to the quartet. Shaw refers to the focal point of the album, *The Evergreen*.

it depicts only indirectly. With its explicit environmental theme, oblique representation of its eponymous object, and Shaw's suggestion that the listener adopt a nonhuman perspective while listening to the work (or that the work elicits such a response), *The Evergreen*, at just twenty minutes in length, provides a compelling case study for further investigation into the implications of theatricality as it relates to ecological music.

Building on the previous chapter, this chapter fleshes out the applicability of OOO-inflected ecocriticism alongside more of Morton's most recurring conceptual tools, specifically those that make their work *eco*-philosophy. In light of Morton's regular insistence that OOO provides a productive framework for ecological thought, my work here investigates the degree to which that framework can be regarded as ecological when applied to analysis of a musical work. In my analysis, I draw on Morton's book *Realist Magic*.

In *Realist Magic*, Morton proposes an object-oriented sublime. Their discussion there demonstrates that reconceptualizing the sublime through OOO carries significant implications for the study of aesthetics through an ecocritical lens. It is particularly relevant for the study of musical aesthetics (and therefore also musical analysis and interpretation) in which the sublime has been an influential topic of theoretical discourse since the beginning of the nineteenth century.²³¹ Moreover, their discussion provides a valuable entry point for understanding how

²³¹ There has been a resurgence of interest in the sublime in the last two decades as demonstrated by several publications: Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability* (Fordham University Press, 2009); Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon, eds., *Music and the Sonorous Sublime in European Culture, 1680–1880* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Miranda Eva Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime: Music in English and German Literature and Aesthetic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Morteza Abedinifard, "Beyond Nature: Subjectivity and the Musical Sublime," *19th-Century Music* 47, no. 2 (2023): 89–110; Levinson "Sublime Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 82 (2024): 367–75; and Esteban Buch, Mario Lorenzo, Amélie Jacquot, Marco Sperduti, Margherita Arcangeli, Jérôme Dokic, "In Search of Sublime Music," *Music Perception* 42, no. 4 (April 2025): 362–88. The first four publications above feature critical histories of the sublime. Regarding twenty-first century interest in the topic within music studies, Katherine Fry provides a concise overview in her review of the second and third books mentioned above: Katherine Fry, "Variations on the Musical Sublime," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 147, no. 2 (2023): 645–53.

OOO approaches the status of objects in general and, by extension, how art objects may be conceptualized, too. The central question of this chapter is: How can an object-oriented sublime change the ways in which musical objects and their aesthetic significance are understood, especially with respect to ecocritical approaches in music studies? I explore that question with *The Evergreen*.

In this chapter I argue that the four objects depicted by *The Evergreen*, including the evergreen itself, emerge as sublime in the object-oriented sense that Morton puts forward in *Realist Magic*. In doing so, I show how an object-oriented sublime can intervene in ecocritical music studies by challenging anthropocentric assumptions (especially those associated with traditional conceptions of the sublime itself) and, more importantly, help (re)imagine how musical objects figure in the aesthetics of ecological awareness.

This chapter proceeds as follows: The first section features an overview of *The Evergreen*. In the second section I introduce Morton's object-oriented conception of the sublime. The last section features interpretive commentary on each movement of Shaw's work in which the main aspects of the previous section are integrated. I conduct my analysis alongside the score and Shaw's liner notes for the Attaca Quartet's album. I focus on the implications of the OOO concepts of *allure* (an unsettling of the ordinary flow of experience) and *theatricality* (the union of beholder and object).²³² The significance of my interpretive work here lies in its capacity to facilitate more intimate engagement with Shaw's work, with the objects and tensions to which it alludes and depicts.²³³

²³² Countercompositionals are favored since, as noted in the previous chapter, they serve to capture something of the work's autonomy by alluding to its reality apart from any beholder. Countercompositionals may involve imagining or replacing qualities attributed to the objects depicted—re-arranging qualities in relation to what one hears or what is implied by the score. Countercompositionals involve imagining alternative physicality, drawing attention to the metaphoric structures that the work creates and the imagery associated with those structures.

Broadly, this chapter investigates how OOO can help with thinking ecocritically about music, as well as what constitutes ecological music. It contributes to music studies more generally by challenging conventional (Romantic-era) understandings of the sublime as it relates to music and by offering an interpretation of Morton's object-oriented sublime as an alternative for music studies. In doing so, it sheds light on how scholars can think about human-nonhuman entanglement in relation to music and musical experience.

Finally, building on the paradox that human beholders are responsible for *performing* nonhuman things in art, this chapter explores how nonhuman agency can manifest in musical experience, how coexistence becomes central to understanding music as a result, and the implications of understanding that musical coexistence. This chapter concludes with some additional reflections and remarks regarding how other music scholars can advance the topics covered here. Ultimately, this chapter contributes to one of the three broader aims of this dissertation: namely, to examine how OOO can reshape the methods and priorities of ecocritical music studies by setting it to work as both theory and method.

The Evergreen

In her preface to the work, Shaw states that she composed *The Evergreen* as a personal offering to a single tree. Her description emphasizes companionship and sensitive observation rather than feelings of overwhelming fear or awe. The evergreen is "towering" but "wrapped in soft green," "craggy" but "gentle." Shaw even describes the environment of the tree: it was "standing silently in a small clearing" where sunlight "sneaks up." The work then invokes intimacy, not the

²³³ At the end of *Weird Realism*, Harman notes that the passages he examines *allude* to the tensions he discusses. This is an important distinction to draw attention to here. Passages in Shaw's quartet do not correspond to specific tensions but depending on how listeners perceive those passages they may vary in terms of which tension most appropriately describes their experience. Harman, *Weird Realism*, 257.

grandeur associated with any ordinary notion of the sublime. Shaw's description is in direct contrast, at least, to the Romantic sublime, which typically portrays nature as a force of overwhelming presence.

Generally speaking, sublime experiences involve the limits of human perception. The two dominant theories of musical sublimity stem primarily from the work of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. For Burke, the sublime involves shock while for Kant the sublime is either mathematical or dynamical, something immeasurably vast or something immeasurably powerful. Morton helpfully describes both positions. For Burke, the sublime is “an experience of terrifying authority to which you must submit,” while for Kant it is “an experience of inner freedom based on some kind of temporary failure.”²³⁴ Similarly, musical sublimity involves experiences with some form of immensity, whether that is through large-scale formal structures, dramatic contrasts, or emotionally intense passages that gesture beyond human comprehension.²³⁵ On the surface then, *The Evergreen* appears like the last work to be called sublime. The work diverges significantly from traditional conceptions of the sublime and instead aligns more closely with ideas of intimacy and contemplation. I turn to a fuller examination of the sublime according to Burke and Kant, as well as *The Evergreen* as sublime, later. Here, I mainly provide an introductory summary of the work—the remarks above serve to frame that summary.

The first movement, “Moss,” begins with each instrument entering one-by-one (0:00–0:44—Figure 7).²³⁶ Staggered entries are not unusual in works for string quartet, although here

²³⁴ I borrow their descriptions of both theories here for the sake of consistency with their own discussion and to avoid superfluity. These descriptions can be said to constitute the starting point from which their critique emerges. Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128.

²³⁵ At least, this how musical sublimity has generally been understood since Hoffmann's influential 1810 essay: E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Beethoven's Instrumental Music,” in *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism*, ed. David Charlton, trans. Martyn Clarke (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 96–102.

the effect can suggest the impression of densely layered moss, especially when observed up-close. This opening gesture encapsulates what happens at the structural level of the movement and the work as a whole: new layers—discrete sections differentiated primarily by texture—are added one at a time, which taken together allude to something more complex.

The movement proceeds through a series of slow, uneven tremolos on harmonics. The first twelve measures (of sixty-four total) last around two minutes. Constant suspensions, together with the slow tempo, make the underlying harmonic progression that unfolds difficult to follow. Dynamically, the first twelve measures comprise one long crescendo. Shaw describes the music as “gauzy” in the score in reference to the translucency of moss.²³⁷ Harmonic tension builds until a dominant harmony signals something new (1:56). The first violin remains dramatically suspended by itself on a tremolo until it receives support from the other instruments in the form of an ascending and out-of-sync rhythmic figure whose function is strictly transitional. The initial texture of the movement returns in full force, suddenly, now accompanied by rapid arpeggiated figures traded between the three upper parts. This section quickly dissolves into silence. The tremolos return, gradually, now without their initial harmonics. Finally, all four parts united proceed through a section of irregular rhythm which oscillates between different

²³⁶ Attaca Quartet, *Evergreen*, Nonesuch Records, 2022, compact disc. All timestamps refer to this recording.

²³⁷ The performance instructions at the top of the first movement state: “Gauzy, slow, uneven tremolo. No strict tempo at first. Each bar quasi-fermata.” These instructions apply to the first twelve measures. The score also instructs the musicians to play the entire movement with mutes. Later, at the end of the movement, the musicians are instructed to “transition to [a] gauzy tremolo.” There, the term functions as a performance indication, since it suggests that the musicians should try to replicate the sonic effect of the opening measures (to re-create the same object-quality tension produced there).

FIGURE 7: The first page of *The Evergreen*.²³⁸

The Evergreen

I. Moss

Gauzy, slow, uneven tremolo.
No strict tempo at first. Each bar quasi-fermata.

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

con sord.

p

mp

p

mp

8

alternating, ad lib.

In tempo-ish (♩=60)

mf

mf

mf

mf

f

f

mf

mf

mf

f

mf

© Caroline Shaw Editions | v 2020.04.20

²³⁸ Shaw, *The Evergreen*, 1. All figures are taken from the reference score and used by permission.

levels of dynamic intensity. The harmonics return and the movement ends with a long fade-out to silence.

The second movement, “Stem,” begins like the first, with staggered entries. Any sense of familiarity is stifled, though, when in measure 5, Shaw instructs the players to “warp up & back, about 50¢” (fifty hundredths of a semitone).²³⁹ Shaw asks for extremely small variations in pitch here and the pitches waver nervously (0:19). In her liner notes for *Evergreen*, Shaw describes the effect: “One violinist holds a single note. Joined, one by one, by the others. Then lean away slowly, splitting the pitch, undermining the singularity for a few moments, smearing the paint, then they lean back toward the shared tone. Like the uneven surface of the stem of three as it reaches up, imperfectly.”²⁴⁰ What follows is an exchange between the upper and lower parts, a persistent rhythmic back-and-forth that drives much of the movement. Individual lines briefly emerge only to be drawn back into a thicket of syncopated rhythms. The movement eventually reaches its apex, if it can be called that. All four parts arrive together on a G-flat major chord (2:02), a point of harmonic stability, where the cello strikes consecutive fifths, a passage that feels like the most grounded in the entire movement. The rapid arpeggios from the first movement return and cast everything into shadows. Growth is halted temporarily, but it cannot be stopped. The movement ends with a surge of energy—a long crescendo, all parts accelerating, urgently, unbounded.

The third movement, “Water,” is semi-improvisatory and evokes the irregular dripping of water. All players perform pizzicato for the entire movement. One player maintains a steady, four-beat pulse, a persistent quarter-note pulse (which mainly serves a practical function—likely

²³⁹ Shaw, *The Evergreen*,

²⁴⁰ *Evergreen*, Attaca Quartet, liner notes (Nonesuch Records, 2022).

FIGURE 8: The beginning of “Water.”²⁴¹

12

III. Water

$\text{♩} = 80$ (tempo can vary)

(vamp until all
pages are turned)
pizz

[vln 1 has the first beat of each bar]

151 *pages are turned)*
pizz [vln 1 has the first beat of each bar]

I

158

1

pizz

mp

[vln 2 has first beats]

164

[vln 2 has first beats]

mf

mf

mf

mf

²⁴¹ Shaw, *The Evergreen*, 12.

for performance-related reasons, Shaw has the players rotate this role). In the absence of strict rhythmic alignment, the pulse offers a reference point for the other players. Whenever all four players are present in the texture, it “disappears”—its presence may be subliminal (Figure 8 above). The notation provides only approximate rhythmic placement for the pizzicato notes. Unstemmed noteheads appear in blank measures so that the temporal relationship of those notes to the underlying pulse can never be exact. The result is an interplay between steadiness and unpredictability—the sound of water dripping from different sources. Because the notated material is not metrically fixed, no two performances of the movement will be rhythmically alike, although timbrally they may be indistinguishable. The movement captures the recognizable sound of dripping water in its consistent inconsistency. There is something “natural” (spontaneous) about it.

As in the preceding movements, dramatic tension is the result of an increase in dynamic intensity and textural density. “Water” swells in a long, drawn-out crescendo which eventually crests with a passage in *fortissimo* (from approximately 3:20 on), where the players are instructed to play with “occasional bartok pizz... [sic],” pizzicato that snaps the string against the fingerboard for a percussive effect—literally the sound of something hitting wood. In the final section, the ensemble oscillates between minor and major harmonies, an effect that foreshadows the beginning of the next movement.

The final movement, “Root,” begins unhurriedly, the cello tracing an Alberti bass pattern (Figure 9). Shaw writes: “free bowing, mix of connected & separate [eighth notes], always phrasing (like baroque continuo).”²⁴² Following Shaw’s performance instruction, the pattern no longer functions in its traditionally subordinate role as rhythmic and harmonic support to more

²⁴² Shaw, *The Evergreen*, full score, 18.

FIGURE 9: The beginning of “Root.”²⁴³

18

IV. Root

231 $\text{♩} = 72$
arco

arco

arco

free bowing, mix of connected & separate,
always phrasing (like baroque continuo)

arco

mf

236

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

mf *p* *f*

242

pp *pp* *pp* *mf*

²⁴³ Shaw, *The Evergreen*, 18.

significant material. The cello's role remains foundational in the sense that it provides the base for metaphorical description. Its uneven and unceasing cyclical motion throughout the movement suggests the subterranean wanderings of a tree's roots. The other parts enter in unison: tendrils of discordant harmony separate but bound to the same origin. Brief passages of four-part writing come and go. The cello remains a solitary figure throughout—autonomous, on its own path, even during passages in which the rest of the ensemble is present.

About a third of the way through the movement, an ascending, syncopated melodic line emerges from the viola, which lends a melancholy air to the cello's insistent progress (3:15). That line and the ostinato pattern merge and intertwine. Shaw's instruction suggests an introspective conclusion: "continue playing that line," she writes, meaning the ascending melody, now distributed in staggered entries between the three upper parts of the ensemble, "in your own time, stay strong at first, then fade (about 4 repetitions)." The cello's wandering disappears before the other parts have finished and the movement eventually fades to silence. Perhaps the most striking annotation in the entire score is the last one, printed just before the double-bar: "viola ends?" The question implies both uncertainty and openness. It suggests the lingering existence of something beyond the notated page, beyond the experience of the work.

Rather than striving for grandeur, transcendence, or a sense of boundlessness that overwhelms its listeners, *The Evergreen* is rooted in intimacy and specificity. While the sublime traditionally operates through vastness and feelings of terror before the magnitude of Nature, *The Evergreen* emphasizes particularity and gestures toward a humble encounter with a nonhuman thing. The work invites listeners to speculate about the objects it depicts. This summary of the work offers a point of departure for discussing Morton's object-oriented sublime, which rejects the Romantic model of sublimity in favor of the strange, withdrawn reality of objects—a mode

of wonder or surprise that stems not from Nature but from the irreducible depth and otherness of objects. Morton asks: why can't the sublime object be something vulnerable or kind?²⁴⁴

An object-oriented sublime?

This section substantiates my interpretive claim about *The Evergreen*: that each movement of the work depicts a sublime object, and that the evergreen itself, to which each movement and the work as a whole alludes, may be characterized as sublime, too. *The Evergreen* creates new gaps between objects and their expected or familiar qualities. The work alludes to the tense fusions between familiar objects and strange qualities.²⁴⁵ I explain how the object-quality tensions produced by the work are best characterized as sublime, according to the object-oriented sublime that Morton proposes in *Realist Magic* and later in their essay "Sublime Objects." Consequently,

²⁴⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 135.

²⁴⁵ While individual passages throughout the movements may be interpreted as either literal or non-literal (according to the interpreter-analyst), what is of interest here, too, is how those passages allude to the different object-quality tensions. The mapping or exploration of those tensions (in relation to individual passages in a given work) is what Harman refers to as *ontography*. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 124–25.

In *Weird Realism*, Harman makes a distinction between "those who destroy gaps by imploding them" (reductionists) and "those who find new gaps in the world where there were formerly none," for whom Harman coins the term *productionists*. Harman applies this distinction to philosophers as an example, but suggests it may be applied to artists, individual works, and even individual passages within those works. The term may be extended to those engaged in various forms of music analysis, too. *Weird Realism* mainly comprises Harman's analysis of one hundred passages from H. P. Lovecraft's fiction. He argues that because Lovecraft so often deals with the gaps between objects and their qualities, Lovecraft is primarily a *productionist*, something that separates him from many of his cult-fiction contemporaries. For this reason, Harman refers to Lovecraft as the object-oriented fiction writer *par excellence*, "a hero to object-oriented thought as Hölderlin was to Heidegger." Harman, *Weird Realism*, 5. According to the claims put forward here, *The Evergreen* is rightly a *productionist* work.

The distinction between reductionism and productionism resembles the distinction between literalism and non-literalism (reductionism and anti-reductionism), although there is an important difference between the two. Just as it would be wrong to characterize *The Evergreen* as a literal work, it is equally wrong to characterize it as a non-literal (anti-reductionist) one. It would be a mistake to assert that passages in a purely instrumental musical work like this one are inherently literal while others are non-literal. This would involve attributing specific content or experiences to two separate kinds of passages, a clear transgression of the taxonomic fallacy. Therefore, with respect to the division between literal and non-literal passages or experience of a given work, quantitative analysis is not helpful, not least since such analysis simply seeks to undermine the work. All of this helps to characterize ecological music in a formal way and suggests another way in which OOO may operate in music studies, beyond its nest in philosophy.

the work can be called sublime because it is *potentially* sublime. Failing to encounter the objects represented in the mode of the sublime does not constitute a failure to encounter the work.

Ecocritical interpretive work, such as the analysis presented in the following section, assumes an instructive approach, to the extent that it seeks primarily to cultivate in the reader a more sensitive attunement to the object under consideration.

The sublime Morton has in mind results from object-object intimacy. The sublime is “within” objects themselves rather than in subjective (human) experience. The scare quotes indicate that way of putting it is not exactly right, although it helpfully sets things on the right track to start. More accurately, objects deliver themselves in the mode of the sublime. Their radical appearances (sensual translations) to a beholder allude to their sublime reality, a reality that provides those sublime appearances (I cover what, for Morton, constitutes “radical” below). The sublime, Morton writes, “tunes us to what is not me.”²⁴⁶ This has significant implications for music studies, especially in the realm of musical aesthetics, where the sublime has played a central role since the beginning of the nineteenth century. I suggest that it has important implications for ecocritical music studies in particular, not least since it challenges anthropocentric conceptions of subject (human)-object (nonhuman) hierarchies. By situating the sublime “within” or “with” objects themselves, Morton emphasizes their autonomous, withdrawn reality apart from any beholder. It follows that musical objects (or the objects which musical objects bring forth to the imagination of the listener) may be accurately or inaccurately described as sublime.

The relevance of Morton’s object-oriented sublime to *The Evergreen* becomes clearer when one considers how the work continually stages encounters with familiar objects and

²⁴⁶ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 135.

unusual qualities. Each movement challenges the expectations of its listeners by presenting recognizable things in forms that resist literal representation—depictions of objects which realize the object-oriented claim that objects never reveal themselves directly but only through sensual translations that allude to their withdrawn reality. The beginning of Shaw’s “Moss” presents what at first seems like a superficial sonic depiction of moss. As the movement unfolds, however, that depiction becomes increasingly elusive (the dominant harmony at 1:57 and the surprising change in mood and texture at 2:06 disrupt the imagery of moss). The result is speculation about what “moss” might *be* beyond its immediate sensual translation. To better understand the significance of Morton’s intervention, it is helpful to survey the sublime as it is traditionally understood in relation to music and how that conception continues to inform contemporary approaches to that topic.

At the start of the nineteenth century, E. T. A. Hoffmann famously established a narrative that would shape much of nineteenth-century aesthetics. For Hoffmann, instrumental music, liberated from its representational constraints by Haydn, Mozart, and then finally Beethoven, emerged as the highest form of musical art precisely because it exceeds ordinary experience (in direct contrast to the argument I make here about Shaw’s work).²⁴⁷ Hoffmann places those three composers (Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven) as the only figures in an origin story in which the sublime progresses toward its fullest realization in Beethoven’s instrumental music. The story has served as a sort of myth in music history, one that positions the instrumental canon as the natural culmination of the sublime impulse in music.²⁴⁸ Since the start of the twenty-first century, a few scholars have sought to intervene in that tradition.

²⁴⁷ Hoffmann, “Beethoven’s Instrumental Music.”

²⁴⁸ Stanyon offers a re-appraisal of that particular understanding of the chronology of the musical sublime. Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime*, 2–3.

In her book *Musically Sublime* (2009), literature and comparative media studies scholar Kiene Brillenburg Wurth redirects sublimity away from notions of transcendence toward irresolution or aporia and temporal affect. Wurth argues that in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interactions with “musicality,” the sublime “branches off into a feeling that always defers resolution as it undermines its own progress, *or* into a feeling that always defers completion because it suspends consciousness—and hence cannot be retrieved or resolved.”²⁴⁹ For Wurth, the sublime is an experience of non-closure, a temporal experience of suspension or delay. Musical sublimity rests in music’s capacity to shape how a listener feels time. Wurth’s intervention may be viewed as a major step toward a broader understanding of sublimity in music studies, one that is not confined to particular composers, instrumental forms, or genre categories. Wurth’s conception of sublimity is ultimately anchored in the subjective experience of a human beholder and so remains anthropocentric, a consideration that bears relevance to the discussion at hand, though describing her study exclusively in that way would be unduly reductive.

The next significant historiographical intervention for twenty-first-century music studies is Sarah Hibberd and Miranda Stanyon’s edited volume *Sonorous Sublimes* (2020), in which scholars argue that the sublime was never a single, unified phenomenon but a contested category shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional forces. “Sublimes” emerge in a variety of contexts, whether sacred, political, theatrical, or domestic, and are bound up with questions of power, religion, and a social world. The sublime shifts from an aesthetic category to a site where music participates in larger cultural negotiations about human experience. Stanyon’s own book *Resounding the Sublime* (2021) follows the same path. Stanyon traces how the sublime was

²⁴⁹ Wurth, *Musically Sublime*, 9.

produced and legitimated not only through philosophical discourse but through literary representations and listening practices.²⁵⁰ Rather than an inherent property of particular works, the sublime emerges as something generated by historical configurations.

Most recently, philosopher Jerrold Levinson has sought to “identify the species of music that is most justifiably denominated sublime and to characterize it as fully as possible” in his essay “Sublime Music” (2024).²⁵¹ He arrives at five distinguishable kinds of sublime music.²⁵² The object-oriented musicologist must reject Levinson’s conceptualization of the sublime for at least two reasons. For one thing, it (once again) reduces (by analogy) musical sublimity (the sublime *experience*) to human experience, this time with natural phenomena (in keeping with the traditional romantic notion of the sublime). This means, moreover, that the sublime is treated as nothing more than a correlate of human experience.

More important to the discussion here is something that Levinson notes at the beginning of his essay, which is that a central issue in theorizing the sublime is “whether the sublime should be characterized in terms of observable properties of sublime *objects* themselves, or instead, in terms of properties of the distinctive *experiences* that sublime objects induce.”²⁵³ As Morton argues, the object-oriented sublime is neither. For OOO, real objects can only ever affect each other indirectly, obliquely, or non-linearly through what Morton describes as “a strange region out in front of them,” their appearances for other real objects. The sublime is not an intrinsic feature of an object, nor does it belong exclusively to a beholder’s subjective experience. Instead, the sublime has to do with how objects appear to other objects.

²⁵⁰ Stanyon, *Resounding the Sublime*, 13–16.

²⁵¹ Levinson, “Sublime Music.”

²⁵² Levinson, “Sublime Music,” 371–72.

²⁵³ Levinson, “Sublime Music,” 368.

The object-oriented sublime that Morton proposes in *Realist Magic* is rooted in their most influential concept of the hyperobject, though that connection is not made explicit until later in “Sublime Objects.”²⁵⁴ A basic understanding of the hyperobject helps support engagement with the topic at hand. A hyperobject is “an object massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.”²⁵⁵ Hyperobjects are “hyper” in relation to other entities, despite Morton’s emphasis on humans in that definition. Indeed, Morton is careful to point out at the beginning of their book that the hyperobject “is not a function of our [human] knowledge, it’s *hyper* relative to worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays, as well as humans.”²⁵⁶ This framing aligns with the metaphysical commitments of OOO, particularly its resistance to correlationism and insistence on the autonomy of objects independent of human thought.²⁵⁷ Morton’s object-oriented sense of the sublime emerges from those central ideas.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ The eight-page discussion in *Realist Magic* devoted to developing an object-oriented sublime is repurposed in that later essay, where Morton identifies the need for an aesthetic framework that can account for the scale and nature of hyperobjects.

To understand hyperobjects, Morton writes at the beginning of that essay, “we badly need an upgraded theory of the sublime, which deals in scary and unknowable things.” Morton, “Sublime Objects,” in *Speculations II*, edited by Michael Austin, Paul J. Ennis, Fabio Gironi, and Thomas Gokey (Punctum Books, 2020), 207–27.

²⁵⁵ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

²⁵⁶ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 2.

²⁵⁷ Morton characterizes the first part of *Hyperobjects* as a “direct philosophical, historical, and cultural explication” of hyperobjects. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 3. The first part of the book involves separate explorations of the different properties of hyperobjects—five interrelated qualities: *viscosity* (“an overall quality of hyperobjects”), *nonlocality*, *temporal undulation*, *phasing*, and *interobjectivity*. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 3. These can be summarized briefly: *Viscosity* refers to human and nonhuman entanglement with the hyperobject. *Nonlocality* means that a hyperobject is never fully present in one place. *Temporal undulation* refers to the object-oriented idea that objects generate space and time as opposed to being contained by those things (time and space are emergent properties of objects). *Phasing* suggests that hyperobjects shift in and out of perception. *Interobjectivity* means that hyperobjects affect object-object interrelations.

²⁵⁸ Harman also finds support for an object-oriented sublime in Morton’s concept. The hyperobject, Harman writes, “functions in part as a rival and alternative to the sublime.” Harman, “Rock Art and the Aesthetics of Hyperobjects,” in *Ontologies of Rock Art: Images, Relational Approaches, and Indigenous Knowledges*, ed. Oscar Moro Abadía and Martin Porr (Routledge, 2021), 37. Combined with OOO’s emphasis on the withdrawal of objects, the concept appears to offer an appropriate alternative for the overwhelming otherness of sublimity. Hyperobjects are *large* and *unknowable*. But that fact can lead to a few incorrect assumptions. For one thing, “there is nothing inherently

Briefly, hyperobjects (like global warming) challenge conventional modes of perception and cognition. Because one only ever perceives hyperobjects indirectly, Morton insists that the sort of aesthetic experiences associated with art in particular can help make sense of them. Since art requires or necessitates theatricality, art asks for *intimacy* with objects. Art becomes an important medium through which one can access objects which otherwise exceed cognitive grasp. It is at the intersection of art and hyperobjects where the sublime emerges as an important topic. Hyperobjects produce affective responses historically associated with the sublime. They disturb and interfere with other objects—they are *unsettling*.

Due to their large, unknowable nature, there is something astonishing or awe-inspiring about hyperobjects. But again, Morton asks, why can't the sublime object be something vulnerable or kind?²⁵⁹ The question implies that sublimity belongs to objects, not their beholders. The question is then how. If the sublime resides “in” objects as opposed to one who perceives those objects, then the sublime may encompass far more than just astonishment and awe. Those reactions may inform a characterization of the sublime, but they must be framed broadly enough to encompass nonhuman as well as human experience.²⁶⁰ All hyperobjects may be sublime but

sublime about the thing-in-itself for Kant,” and the same holds true for OOO’s real objects. Harman, “Rock Art,” 40. The fact that objects withdraw does not automatically grant them some kind of sublime status. In fact, as discussed below, it would be more accurate to say that *how* they withdraw grants them that status. Moreover, the Kantian sublime is, as Harman points out, “always treated as infinite (at least by contrast with the human scale) [...] whereas the object for OOO is always finite and fully articulated even if beyond our direct grasp.” Harman, “Rock Art,” 36–37.

Morton’s concept does not suggest *infinitely large* things but rather *very large finitude*, a point which Harman calls “an oft-overlooked aspect” of the concept. Harman, “Rock Art,” 39. Morton writes: “[H]yperobjects are not forever. What they offer instead is *very large finitude*.” Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 60. And it must be remembered that hyperobjects, like all objects, do not exist because humans observe them—humans observe them *because* they exist.

²⁵⁹ “Why couldn’t the sublime object be something vulnerable or kind?” Morton, *Realist Magic*, 135. The question comes following Morton’s comparison between the Longinian sublime and the sublime according to Burke and Kant.

²⁶⁰ The question regarding what constitutes astonishment and awe for a nonhuman is relevant but obviously beyond the scope of the present discussion. It remains a consideration worth bearing in mind, though.

not all sublime objects are hyperobjects. Therefore, the question that Morton must grapple with is: what makes a sublime object?

Like other contemporary scholars working with the topic of the sublime, Morton seeks an alternative to the two dominant theories of the sublime found in the work of Burke and Kant, respectively.²⁶¹ They find three flaws in both the Burkean and Kantian sublime for OOO: Both assume that *the world is specially or uniquely accessible to humans*, that *the sublime uniquely correlates the world to humans*, and that *what is important about the sublime is a reaction in the subject*.²⁶² All three assumptions imply that human beings are in some way ontologically special and amount to pure anthropocentrism. The object-oriented thinker must reject both. Dispelling correlationism is the first task. In contrast to the two dominant theories of the sublime, Morton asserts that what is needed is “a more *speculative* sublime that actually tries to become intimate with the other.”²⁶³ To speculate entails *distance* from something.

The Kantian sublime rules out the kind of intimacy Morton has in mind. The sublimity of the ocean, according to Kant, rests on its beholder’s *avoidance* of speculation about its nature: “The sublime is precisely the *lack of speculation*.”²⁶⁴ This is why speculative realism requires a sublime that “grants a kind of *intimacy* with real entities.” An object-oriented sublime must emphasize the withdrawal of real objects. It must maintain sublimity as something not restricted

²⁶¹ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 131. I borrow their descriptions of both theories here for the sake of consistency with their own discussion and to avoid superfluity. These descriptions constitute the starting point from which their critique emerges: The Burkean sublime involves shock and awe (“an experience of terrifying authority to which you must submit”) while the Kantian sublime is either mathematical or dynamical (“an experience of inner freedom based on some kind of temporary cognitive failure”), something immeasurably vast or something immeasurably powerful. Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128.

²⁶² Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128.

²⁶³ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128. Morton refers to OOO’s origin as a particular strand of speculative realism.

²⁶⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 130.

to certain kinds of objects, and place sublimity “in” or with objects, rather than as something opposed to them. What is needed is sublime that is generalizable to all objects.

The main problem with the two dominant theories of the sublime from an object-oriented standpoint is that they both depend on human subjective access to objects. Both theories also reject the notion that the sublime may exist in metaphysical contemplation, reflection on the nature of reality, or speculation about objects themselves. The Kantian sublime stops with human relations to the sensual translations of objects. Nevertheless, Morton admits the Kantian sublime is a preferable starting point (to Burke) since there is at least “an echo of reality in the Kantian sublime.”²⁶⁵ Sensual translations always imply a deeper reality.

Whether mathematical or dynamical, the Kantian sublime involves a human (mind)-world correlate. Rather than situating the sublime in or with reality itself, the Kantian sublime reduces objects to their appearances for humans. This presents a major problem for Morton’s thesis, which is that causality belongs to the aesthetic dimension and not just the aesthetic dimension as it is experienced by humans. An object-oriented sublime demands sublimity for object-object relations, not just human-world relations. Morton shifts sublimity from the aesthetic dimension to objects themselves with the help of *allure*.²⁶⁶ “Sublime objects” are

²⁶⁵ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128.

²⁶⁶ The American philosopher Steven Shaviro noticed the connection between the sublime and allure in his 2010 essay in the volume *The Speculative Turn*: Steven Shaviro, “The Actual Volcano: Whitehead, Harman, and the Problem of Relations,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Harman (re:press, 2010), 279–90.

Shaviro writes that allure “is properly a sublime experience,” since to be allured is “to be beckoned into a realm that cannot ever be reached.” Shaviro, “The Actual Volcano,” 289. Harman’s response to Shaviro’s essay appears in that same volume. There, Harman contests Shaviro’s identification of the sublime as allure by countering that Shaviro “misses at least two major differences between allure and the sublime.” Harman, “Response to Shaviro,” in *The Speculative Turn*, 302. The two major differences are that the sublime is a theory about *human experience* and that “in the aesthetics of the sublime the sublime is generally treated as *one*. The roaring of the sea and a tornado are not said to give us two *different* sublimines.” Harman, “Response to Shaviro,” 303. Harman’s response reads like less like disagreement, though, than an attempt to clarify his own position. (Another issue with Shaviro’s passage could be that it appears to suggest that the sublime is reducible to the tension called *allure*. Morton extends the sublime to

objects that instill a sense of awe or wonder in their beholder. With the help of OOO, Morton makes the case that awe and wonder are *not* exclusively human. As opposed to a subjective human experience, awe involves an ontological state of suspension in which one being exerts a pull or influence on another.²⁶⁷ Non-literal experience may be called the foundation for object-oriented sublimity.

The withdrawal of real objects means that, experientially, intimacy with other things entails something like a desire to grasp the missing object. In the case of metaphor, for example, a beholder's enactment of the missing object involves an aesthetic experience simultaneously characterized by "attainment" of the object "performed" and the absence of its immediate presence. As discussed previously, the objects which *The Evergreen* depicts are both present and not present to the listener (within aesthetic experience).

Morton ultimately concludes that *the way objects appear to one another is sublime*.²⁶⁸ Thus, they position sublimity in object-object relations. An object *is* sublime to its beholder, not because its beholder experiences the object as such but because of the way in which the object delivers itself to that beholder. "The sublime resides in particularity," Morton notes, "not in some distant beyond."²⁶⁹ Sublimity is *how objects appear*. An object appears in the mode of the sublime, and its appearances indicate the existence of what one can then accurately call a sublime object. This view of the sublime means that the sublime is indeed generalizable to all objects, insofar as all objects are withdrawn to themselves and to one another in an irreducible

other tensions, too.) Harman emphasizes that, for him, allure "seeps down even into the heart of inanimate matter." Harman, "Response to Shaviro," 302. Indeed, like the three other object-quality tensions, allure describes a possible relation between any two objects (human or nonhuman).

²⁶⁷ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 141–44.

²⁶⁸ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 131.

²⁶⁹ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128.

way.²⁷⁰ The last thing to cover here is *how* sublime objects appear, according to Morton.²⁷¹ I illustrate the main points with commentary on passages in *The Evergreen*.

Having established that Morton situates sublimity within object-object relations and the aesthetic dimension, the next step is to consider how those relations take shape in specific encounters. Objects only ever encounter sensual translations of other objects.²⁷² Objects first deliver or present themselves to other objects as sensual translations. Insofar as those translations are radically unorthodox or unexpected (constitute *alluring tension*, something not decided in advance), they may be regarded as sublime. Radical translations allude to the existence of a sublime object. Morton finds a map of those radical translations in four terms derived from Longinus's *On the Sublime*, which they map onto Harman's fourfold (although that mapping is not clearly stated): *brilliance*, *clarity*, *transport*, and *phantasia*.²⁷³ The first two refer to "the

²⁷⁰ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 128.

²⁷¹ For Morton in *Realist Magic*, rhetoric means *how something appears*. Rhetoric therefore serves as a useful analogy for understanding what happens in any object-object relation. Morton finds their model for an object-oriented sublime in the rhetorical theory of Longinus. Morton proposes that "On the Sublime," the earliest text on that topic, is "about the physical intrusion of an alien presence." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 131. With its focus on *how to achieve sublimity*, the Longinian sublime emphasizes sensual contact between two objects: "Because he is more interested in how to achieve the effect of sublimity rhetorically than what the sublime is as a human experience, Longinus leaves us free to extrapolate all kinds of sublime events between all kinds of entities." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 131. In their usual idiosyncratic way, Morton reverses the five parts of rhetoric so that delivery or presentation (the availability of the sensual object), traditionally the final part or step in the process, takes precedence over all others: "Working backwards, the sensual object persists (*memoria*), it displays a unique "style" (*elocutio*), it organizes its notes and parts (*dispositio* and *ordo*) and it contains what Harman calls a 'molten core' that withdraws from all contact (*inventio*)." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 131.

²⁷² These translations, which belong to the aesthetic dimension, are what drive causality for OOO. This is why Morton ponders where it is possible to imagine that an object-oriented rhetorical theory may account for vicarious causation. Morton, "Sublime Objects," 215.

²⁷³ *Real objects*, *real qualities*, *sensual objects*, and *sensual qualities*, respectively.

What the Longinian sublime (as rhetorical theory) provides Morton as a foundation for thinking an object-oriented sublime is the idea that the sublime is "in the object, in the not-me." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 135. Morton once again reads them in reverse order and illustrates them in object-oriented fashion. Until that point, Morton's exploration of an object-oriented sublime remains primarily ontological, but here they arrive at something like phenomenological descriptions of the sublime in their descriptions of the four terms. Morton references Heidegger's late fourfold here. Morton, *Realist Magic*, 132. It is possible that Morton wished to avoid mapping them onto Harman's fourfold for the sake of maintaining some sense of objecthood in relation to the

actuality of object-object encounters,” while the last two refer to “the appearance of these encounters,” by which Morton presumably means the way in which a new object relation arrives from the sublime object.²⁷⁴ The four terms above provide a useful map for articulating how radical translations manifest within aesthetic encounters. Each term highlights a different facet of the sublime object.

Brilliance is “the secretiveness of the object, its total inaccessibility prior to relations. In the mode of the sublime, it’s as if we are able to taste that, even though it’s strictly impossible.”²⁷⁵ The “as if” is important here, as it makes the description appear to align with what theatricality inevitably entails—it is *as if* the object is directly present. The object is glaring, it is *right there*, and yet it is not, at the same time. The beginning of “Moss” may seem so obviously mossy to a listener at first that they are inclined to roll their eyes. But what may initially seem obvious (a literal depiction of the fuzzy, green stuff) gradually, over the course of two minutes, becomes something more mysterious. The moss becomes increasingly more *brilliant* as it lures the listener into speculation about its true nature. Likewise, when “Water” eventually becomes something more organized (perhaps around 2:40 with the change of harmony), the illusion fades and the chemical compound takes on definite *musical* qualities, which place that compound into a new tension. This (speculative) intimacy with another object is what helps characterize theatricality as coexistence.

four terms. For example, *transport* refers to “objects as something-at-all for another object.” Morton, *Realist Magic*, 132. I see no reason not to cut to the chase, however, since qualities under any kind of scrutiny must be considered objects in their own right, at least in certain circumstances.

Brilliance may offer a way of rethinking the notion that objects are intrinsically “dark.” Brilliance does not mean that we can see them clearly but that they are so glaring that they blind us to what they are.

²⁷⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 132.

²⁷⁵ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 133.

Clarity is an object “in its bristling specificity,” therefore Morton connects clarity to ekphrasis (typically hyper-descriptive passages in poetry or prose).²⁷⁶ Passages throughout *The Evergreen* can be interpreted as hyper-descriptive of the evergreen or the objects to which the individual movements refer. These passages can constitute moments of alluring tension. Morton suggests the physicality of ekphrasis involves interrupting the flow of the narrative, tearing the beholder out of complacency.²⁷⁷ Following the sudden ending of the second movement, the first note of “Water” jumps out at the listener, and time comes to a standstill. The beginning of “Water” involves the feeling of being immediately teleported somewhere else. The movement makes the presence of dripping water immediate, an in-your-face kind of depiction. It is *as if* the water is directly present. As if shielded by the branches of a tree, the listener hears the splash of water droplets all around them. The movement is so watery one may forget that it is only the sound of the musicians plucking the strings of their instruments.

The other two terms, *transport* and *phantasia* refer to the ways in which object-object encounters appear (arrive). Both terms highlight that sublime objects can, in fact, be vulnerable or kind. A sublime object *transports* something (“some kind of divine or demonic energy”) into its beholder (or that beholder into something else). The beholder feels “moved,” “stirred,” and so on.²⁷⁸ “Water” builds up to a six-measure passage (3:39–4:21, mm. 214–219—Figure 10)

²⁷⁶ Morton, “Sublime Objects,” 223. Ekphrasis “looms out” and involves a “bristling vividness that interrupts the flow of the narrative.” Morton also writes: “In strictly OOO terms, ekphrasis is a translation that inevitably misses the secretive object, but which generates its own kind of object in the process.” Morton, *Realist Magic*, 133. “Ekphrasis speaks to how objects move and have agency, despite our awareness or lack of awareness of them.” Morton, *Realist Magic*, 133.

²⁷⁷ Morton, “Sublime Objects,” 222–223.

²⁷⁸ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 133.

FIGURE 10: Glissandi in “Water.”²⁷⁹

16

207

210

M [all together]

ff *p* *f* *p* *mf* *p*

ff *p* *f* *p* *mf* *p*

ff *p* *f* *p* *mf* *p*

ff *p* *f* *p* *mf* *p*

²⁷⁹ Shaw, *The Evergreen*, 16.

where the ensemble performs a sequence of glissandi (twenty in total across all four parts), an already strange effect made stranger by the fact that, as in the rest of the movement, all of the pitches are plucked. The Attaca Quartet makes a notable interpretive decision to disconnect measures 213 and 214. Rather than sustaining the forward momentum of the movement to the *fortissimo* in measure 214, thereby establishing in retrospect a long trajectory of increasing dynamic and textual intensity that culminates in that measure, there is instead a dramatic, sudden pause. The movement plunges into silence—the moment the surface tension breaks.

The passage from measure 214 to 219 evokes the experience of sounds while submerged in water. Pitch-based irregularity rather than rhythmic irregularity helps to shift the perspective. Sound travels faster in water than in air and here, for the first time in the movement, all four parts are synchronized (Shaw even reminds the ensemble of this by writing “all together”). All prior sense of space or direction is lost. The glissandi exaggerate the vibration of the pitches (*clarity*) and suggest the way in which a body receives sound while submerged in water via bone conduction—vibrations that are felt as much as heard. The passage dissolves the boundary between auditory perception and physical sensation, the distance between the listener and the water. The listener becomes part of the water, or perhaps the other way around. Or the sublime object produces imagery within its beholder—it conjures objects (*phantasia*).²⁸⁰ Even without knowledge of its title for guidance, “Water” is still likely to conjure imagery of dripping water in its listener.

A more in-depth look at the connections Morton makes between Harman’s fourfold and OOO is unnecessary here, as it ventures too far into theoretical technicalities. It is enough to

²⁸⁰ “In stories, for instance, *phantasia* generates an object-like entity that separates us from the narrative flow— puts us in touch with the alien as alien. Visualization should be slightly scary: you are summoning a real deity after all, you are asking to be overwhelmed, touched, moved, stirred.” Morton, *Realist Magic*, 134.

point out that Morton seeks to reinforce a basic idea of OOO, that *causality is aesthetic*. Morton concludes that the sublime tunes us to what is *not* us: “Before it’s fear or freedom,” they write, “the sublime is coexistence.”²⁸¹ *What* the sublime is must be derived from examining *how* the sublime tunes other objects. The object-oriented sublime Morton proposes involves a sublime object that is sublime *in itself* or *with other objects*, as opposed to sublime *for* someone. The four movements of *The Evergreen* are not sublime because their listener perceives them as such but because each fulfills the basic criteria for sublime objecthood that Morton outlines.

Morton once again points out why OOO is conducive for thinking ecologically. But one may wonder whether their proposed re-conceptualization of the sublime with OOO diverges so radically from traditional understandings that calling it “the sublime” is ultimately still useful. The idea is that objects ask to be treated in certain ways. Objects project the ways in which they want to be treated. What objects ask to be treated as sublime? This question remains relevant to discussions on the topic.²⁸² The answer is: those objects that appear in the form of radical translations, those that invite one to speculate about their existence in all its particularities.²⁸³

Ecological music offers intimacy with other objects—objects it portrays, represents, or depicts. This intimacy, made radical through the ways in which those portrayals, representations, and depictions de-literalize those objects, is what signals the presence of the sublime. Object-oriented sublimity is found “in” other objects, not in one’s own state of mind (more accurately, sublimity is found “in front of” objects). Objects are sublime because of the way in which they

²⁸¹ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 135.

²⁸² As indicated by Levinson’s recent article on the sublime.

²⁸³ One may be tempted to point out here, too, that Morton’s sublime remains correlated to human experience, but this is not the case, even though the focus of Morton’s discussion (and my own here) is restricted to that experience. Nothing prevents one from describing how a tree may experience sublimity save one’s own knowledge and imagination. Harman’s fourfold, from which Morton derives their understanding of the sublime, is not restricted to human beings, but is a ubiquitous ontological structure.

deliver or present themselves, not because some beholder chooses to describe them as sublime. Sublimity belongs to the objects portrayed or brought to the listener's imagination which generate those points of view. To justify characterizing an object as sublime requires the most basic part of any ecocritical endeavor: coexistence. Following that, analysis. My analytical commentary does not point to explicit "non-literal moments" in the work but, sticking close to an ecocritical mindset which seeks to foster coexistence with something, aims to support non-literal engagement with the work.

The theoretical groundwork laid out above establishes the terms for understanding how *The Evergreen* operates as a collection of sublime objects, each of which alludes to and refracts the sublime object that is the evergreen itself. Morton's object-oriented sublime not only reorients where and how the sublime may be located but also provides a set of analytical tools for exploring how the sublime manifests through a musical work. Each movement of *The Evergreen* foregrounds different modes of *brilliance*, *clarity*, *transport*, and *phantasia*. In the next section I examine each movement in turn and demonstrate how non-literal experience with the work corresponds to the different facets of Morton's object-oriented sublime.

The Evergreen, again

Support for my claim that *The Evergreen* is sublime does not involve labeling individual passages or specific moments "in" the work sublime or pointing to a real or imagined experience of *The Evergreen* and identifying that experience as sublime. Such endeavors are antithetical to disclosing the reality of an object, which requires a more indirect approach. My analysis here highlights the non-literal possibilities afforded to a listener by Shaw's work, how those non-literal passages correspond to radical translations, and how those translations fall into one of the

categories Morton proposes for an object-oriented sublime. An object is sublime if it can potentially deliver itself to a beholder in the mode of the sublime. This definition diverges from traditional conceptions of the sublime which view the sublime as something purely correlated to human experience or an intrinsic property of an object (for OOO, a *real quality*, which by definition is unknowable and inaccessible). Experientially, *The Evergreen* is not *always* sublime. Ontologically it is sublime because it is always potentially sublime.

Object-oriented musical analysis seeks the autonomy of musical objects; it asks, what metaphors does this work create and *how*?²⁸⁴ The synopsis of *The Evergreen* presented earlier in this chapter illustrates that, when it comes to uncovering the reality of a musical object, paraphrase is woefully inadequate. It mainly serves to overmine the work, to reduce it to hypothetical effects, rather than the actual, physical effects it may have on listeners. Moreover, the kind of paraphrase demonstrated above attributes metaphors to passages in the work rather than examining what metaphors those passages may provide. The latter approach to analysis benefits from countermethods, which help to reveal the autonomy of the work apart from any

²⁸⁴ “Wine-dark sea” produces an entirely different aesthetic effect if its terms are reversed. “Sea-dark wine” is something else. Meanwhile, the phrase “a pen is like a pencil” may be reversed and still carry the same meaning. Metaphors are asymmetrical, they cannot be reversed in the same way as literal statements. Passages that are more readily “reversible” are those that lend themselves to literal interpretations. In fact, this goes both ways. A listener experiences a passage as literal if they perceive that it is easily reversible. Conversely, passages perceived as “irreversible,” or at least not readily reversible, lend themselves to non-literal experience.

The shimmering texture of the first movement brings to mind the wet fuzziness of moss on a log, while the winding bass line throughout “Root” is like the coiling of roots beneath the soil. The first two minutes of “Moss” appear reversible if the listener has the impression, for example, that its overall effect is reducible to just two things, timbre and dynamics. The average digital audio workstation user could produce the same soft tremolo effect, quite possibly with more evocative results. A non-literal experience of the opening may therefore depend on a listener’s appreciation of the string quartet itself, or *how* the effect is produced. (The issue of how knowledge—undermining and overmining—informs aesthetic experience is a topic that falls outside the scope of this chapter.) It is indicative of her artistic sensibilities that, in her liner notes for *Evergreen*, Shaw writes something that is meant to support non-literal experience of the opening of “Moss”: “When the player draws the bow along the string, pivoting the bow to allow more or less hair to make contact, they are in fact producing hundreds of thousands of incredibly small nudges and pricks of the string.” *Evergreen*, liner notes. Meanwhile, “Root” appears reversible if its winding bassline is heard merely as accompaniment to the dissonant high parts and not the roots themselves.

single beholder (an “ideal listener,” or any group of listeners that may be referred to as an authority).

One may point out that the metaphors presented in that synopsis *are* actual, physical effects of *The Evergreen* at play. This is true to an extent, insofar as those metaphors cohere in some way with the passages to which they are attributed. The problem is that paraphrase typically works from the assumption that those metaphors are sufficient enough to describe those passages or the work to which those passages belong (other metaphors may be used). For the object-oriented thinker, uncovering some part of a work’s reality requires an indirect approach. It means sorting out what metaphors *The Evergreen* can create, what objects it depicts (since one cannot assume in advance that it depicts the five objects associated with it in a strictly literal sense), or, and more importantly, what metaphors the work makes possible—the metaphoric structures that invite the listener’s theatrical involvement.

In my analysis here, I distinguish between “literal” and “non-literal” experience in each movement of the work (although my analysis does not actually divide moments of the work up that clearly): moments of “accessible” mimetic description, where the object suggested by the movement’s title is depicted in ways that may be expected, and moments in which the suggested object enters an unusually tense relation with the sonic qualities that are present.²⁸⁵ From a OOO standpoint, it is in the latter moments of non-literal experience that an object’s hidden depths are revealed.

²⁸⁵ Passages throughout the work may be perceived as either literal, non-literal, or both, contingent on the listener’s state of mind, the degree to which that listener is absorbed in the temporal unfolding of the music, or depending on the listener’s knowledge of the objects depicted, for example. No work can ever be *completely* non-literal for the simple reason that the literal forms the basis for non-literal experience in the first place. See Taxier, “Two Ambiguities in Object-Oriented Aesthetic Interpretation,” *Open Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2020): 599–610.

Moss

“What does softness sound like?” This is how Shaw starts her liner notes for *The Evergreen* on the Attaca Quartet’s 2022 album. Like the title of the first movement (“Moss”), the question is meant to guide the listener’s imagination and ultimately shape their experience of the music. But Shaw also uses it to explain her inspiration for the first movement, provide imagery for the listener ahead of future encounters with the work, and to raise the stakes on the environmental theme of the work as a whole:

I began to think of the hair of the bow that draws the sound from string instruments. The surface of the horse hair appears smooth to the naked eye, but in fact it is covered with tiny ridges. Under a microscope, the hair looks like a rocky desert landscape, or a reptile’s scales. These micro cliffs on the surface of the hairs grip and release the string, causing it to vibrate and produce a sustained pitch. There are approximately 70,000 of these ridges per hair along the length of a standard violin bow. When the player draws the bow along string, pivoting the bow to allow more or less hair to make contact, they are in fact producing hundreds of thousands of incredibly small nudges and pricks of the string. To our ears, this registers as a single surface, a single line.²⁸⁶

This introductory note suggests a few things. At a close enough distance, things begin to appear very different, things begin to *feel* very different. Morton calls beginnings “open, disturbing, blissful, horrific.” Not one or the other but all those in combination at once.²⁸⁷ Beneath the blissful opening of “Moss” is something horrific: millions of tiny ridges violently scraping against the steel ridges of violin strings. The shimmering surface (a result, the foreground) conceals the workings of a much smaller world (the processes, a background).

²⁸⁶ *The Evergreen*, liner notes. Morton writes: “Timbral statements can be strongly medial, evoking the medium that utters them. And medial statements can be timbral, pointing the physicality and materiality of the language. This is strongly environmental. A guitar note brings to mind the wood out of which it is made. The timbral and medial are two ways of describing the same thing. This axiom asserts at bottom, foreground and background are more than intertwined.” Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 40. Shaw’s quartet brings to mind the wood out of which the instruments are made.

²⁸⁷ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 124.

Beneath the surface of anything are different points of view waiting to be discovered.²⁸⁸ Beneath the appearances of things are their reality. To put this another way, it is literal imagery that provides the platform for non-literal structures (object-quality tensions) where different points of view become available (via theatricality). Shaw's note suggests that discovering the non-literal possibilities of the literal involves a downward descent, not toward the smaller and smaller parts of things to examine how they constitute the whole, but toward the things that make up the otherwise unobserved backgrounds of objects and their appearances.

Shaw's evocative introductory note does work on at least three levels simultaneously. On one level, it places hyper-descriptive imagery of the workings of a violin performance in its reader's imagination. The quiet tremolos become single lines while the rapid arpeggios become the scraping-together of two uneven surfaces. The movement creates an effect that is like the dynamic scaling of a Mandelbrot set. On another level, it attributes brutal qualities to a familiar soft thing (moss), thereby indirectly encouraging listeners to reconcile the otherwise literal softness of moss with something more troubling. Finally, it parallels my claim that theatricality involves intimacy with objects and that such intimacy engenders new points of view (a beholder's relation to qualities left behind, in this case "brutal" ones). Additionally, it implies that processes and results can be at odds. Theatricality precipitates surprising results.

Shaw then notes the importance of rosin to the process described above:

One secret ingredient to this process is rosin, a solidified form of resin, or sap, that comes from coniferous trees like pines, firs, and cedars. When combined with the microridges on the surface of the horse hair, the rosin strengthens the grip of the hair along the string, feeding the resonance of the violin's top plate, which was carved from the wood of a spruce tree. The evergreen's very body and vital fluid are a part of every note.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁸ OOO allows one to interpret a point of view as the relation between an object and its own qualities. Thus, a beholder can be said to enter a new point of view via *theatricality*. This way of theorizing points of view may be significant for scholars seeking to understand how art, in general, can foster nonhuman points of view.

She draws her listener's attention to the presence of the evergreen in the sound itself. Thus, one may point to two ongoing processes throughout the work: the first involves the temporal unfolding of imagery guided primarily by each movement's title (along with Shaw's liner notes), the second involves the physical act of creating that imagery from the very thing being evoked. Shaw's liner notes for "Moss" make it clear to the listener that her work is a thoroughly ecological one in concept and in actuality.

Shaw's last words about "Moss" anthropomorphize the tree: "By the time we met each other, this evergreen tree's arms were completely covered in moss. It looked like some kind of ceremonial cloak. Something that says both 'you are safe' and 'you are disappearing.'"²⁹⁰ The phrase "by the time we met each other" acknowledges the autonomous life of the evergreen, its life before her encounter with it, and also suggests that the encounter was not strictly one-sided. Moreover, Shaw refers to the moss that drapes over the tree's "arms" as a "ceremonial cloak," which invites the reader to imagine the tree as something more than an inert lump of matter. But despite all this attention to the tree, it is the moss that emerges as the central focus of the description, albeit subtly, in an indirect way.

It is the imagery of the evergreen wrapped in its ceremonial mossy cloak that lends the moss its unusual qualities. With her metaphoric description of it as a "ceremonial cloak," Shaw alludes to the ritualistic way in which the moss proceeds to overtake the tree's own outward appearances. The moss is paradoxically protective, transformative, and destructive. It is not merely decoration but something that draws attention to the evergreen's presence ("you are safe") and absence ("you are disappearing"), prompting speculation about its past and future. The

²⁸⁹ *Evergreen*, liner notes.

²⁹⁰ *Evergreen*, liner notes.

moss draws attention to the way in which the evergreen both is and is not its appearances, the object-oriented concept of the work. The compelling power of ecological music is that it exudes “echoes of real objects,” as Morton puts it: objects that pre-exist any utility, meaning, or interpretation.²⁹¹

One could replicate the opening two minutes of “Moss” in a more evocative way with synthesized sounds or added digital effects. While this may be called an effective example of ruination, it does not actually reveal what makes the opening two minutes of “Moss” *that particular* musical experience.²⁹² As a countercompositional, the imaginary replica reduces those two minutes to three things: timbre, volume, and a general unevenness in tempo. But object-oriented musical analysis seeks object autonomy, what makes musical objects themselves. Therefore, the question is: what makes “Moss” *this particular* depiction of moss? How does “Moss” de-literalize moss? I argue that it is the inevitable micro variations in sound that result from the use of real string instruments, the listener’s knowledge that the music is produced by real string instruments, and perhaps the listener’s knowledge that the music is produced by real, hesitating human beings. Shaw’s evocative liner notes for the movement suggest this, too, since she is quick to point out the natural components of the objects responsible for the music. Her performance indications in the score also confirm her interest in producing “natural” objects (the four objects to which the work alludes but also the evergreen itself) for which humans are ultimately responsible.

²⁹¹ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 127.

²⁹² The fact that the effect is made *more* effective does not disqualify it as an example of ruination, since that method goes both ways. Harman writes: “By Karl Popper’s famous principle, a theory is scientific only if it can be falsified. I would go further and say not only that a statement is effective only when it can be ruined, but that the statement is of higher quality the more ways it can be ruined. After all, the fact that a statement can be ruined means that this has not already occurred. It also means that we can use possible ruinings, and sometimes possible improvements, as a method of analyzing the effects of a literary statement.” While Harman works exclusively with literary statements, I see no reason why this method cannot be brought to individual musical passages.

Contrary to the exactness of *The Evergreen*'s score, all its movements thrive on a certain "naturalness" in the approach the players take to interpreting them—in other words, a certain degree of spontaneity is necessary to make the music "come alive." What makes "Moss" *unique* in its de-literalization of moss is its insistence on uncertainty. The fermatas which encourage the players to linger on the tremolos longer than the corresponding notated duration; the harmonics, which will vary according to the body of the instrument and the weight of the musician's finger; the tempo, which remains unsteady throughout (Shaw writes "No strict tempo at first" and then, before the rapid arpeggios, "In tempo-ish"); the quickly shifting dynamics—all of these elements contribute to the pervasive uncertainty of the movement. To effectively ruin "Moss," it is necessary to ruin its *uncertainty*.

How does *The Evergreen* begin? Morton suggests that the feeling of beginning is like "flickers of uncertainty"; a beholder feels "uncertain whether the story proper has begun at all."²⁹³ Ignoring Morton's emphasis on narrative; the feeling of beginning is distortion, the absence of a reference point. The beholder feels "thrown into an ongoing situation. *There is already at least one object.*"²⁹⁴ "Moss" suggests *an object that was already there*. Is the first tremolo the beginning of "Moss," or is it the silence that comes before it? Or is it one's contemplation of the work's title, or the title of the movement? There are "flickers of uncertainty" everywhere.

Shaw's performance instructions at the top of the movement state: "Gauzy, slow, uneven tremolo. No strict tempo at first. Each bar quasi-fermata."²⁹⁵ The uneven tremolos on harmonics

²⁹³ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 124.

²⁹⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 126.

²⁹⁵ These instructions apply to the first twelve measures. The score also instructs the musicians to play the entire movement with mutes.

themselves may be characterized as “flickers of uncertainty”; however, Morton means the flickers of uncertainty that a beholder experiences. With the addition of every new pitch, the underlying harmonic progression of the first twelve measures takes an unexpected turn. But what is most uncertain about the beginning of “Moss” is at what point that beginning is no longer *the beginning*.

From a purely structural standpoint, the completion of the four-part texture via staggered entries in measures 1–4 may be called the beginning or opening section of the movement. Since the eight measures which follow comprise a symmetrical eight-measure phrase (albeit one distorted due to their temporal prolongation), those may signal the start of the movement proper. But this approach ignores the actual musical experience, which involves tracking the unexpected entry of every new tremolo across time. (The Attaca Quartet’s recording is particularly interesting since it is difficult to discern when the second violin enters.) An additive approach to establishing a four-part string texture is not an uncommon compositional strategy for introducing an ensuing symmetrical phrase structure and goes all the way back to the classical period.²⁹⁶ With this strategy the *potential* of the musical texture gradually dissolves through its *realization*. In “Moss,” the strategy suggests that the imagery has now reached a state of completion, its most vivid form. Due to the absence of harmonic closure in measure 12, uncertainty remains. What remains most uncertain is what this mossy stuff really *is* (*clarity* and *brilliance*).

The word “gauzy” stands out. At least, this word is far more evocative than “mossy.” But “gauzy” mainly summarizes the anticipated, overall effect, or qualities of the first twelve measures (the first two minutes in the Attaca Quartet recording). Measures 1–12 evoke the image of something thin, translucent, and fragile. They tune the listener to some object with gauzy (moss-like) qualities. Unlike the rest of the instructions, which follow from that word, “gauzy” does not function as a prompt for a particular kind of playing (neither is it meant to prompt some kind of non-literal interpretation of the musical score). Later, at the end of the movement, the musicians are instructed to “transition to [a] gauzy tremolo.” There, the term functions as a performance indication, since it suggests that the musicians should try to replicate the sonic effect of the opening measures, or to re-create the same object-quality tension produced there.

²⁹⁶ For example, the third movement of Beethoven’s string quartet, op. 135.

A strictly literal (human-centered) experience of this opening section involves reconciling its gauzy qualities with the movement's proposed moss-object, in which case the tremolos may evoke wet moss shimmering beneath the shifting streams of light that break through a canopy of branches above. A literal experience reduces the entire section to vivid imagery. It involves tracking how the qualities of the section map onto the object proposed by the movement's title; in other words, it involves reducing the moss-object to a bundle of moss-like qualities. From this perspective, this two-minute opening section is devoid of any significant aesthetic effect. The listener simply reconciles moss-like qualities with mossy imagery (something that does not happen by choice). The result is nothing more than a depiction of a banal mossy object. A non-literal experience, however, resists immediately attributing the qualities of this section to the proposed object. A non-literal experience involves ridding oneself of one's knowledge about the objects—a state or attitude of speculation. Instead, it involves attention to how the opening section depicts an *experience* of the proposed object, an experience that involves indirect but nevertheless *intimate* contact with the moss-object. The listener must “become” the object depicted. For this to happen, the listener resists the impulse to simply reduce the object to a bundle of literal qualities, and realizes that the reality of the object depicted is something far deeper than any musical portrayal can reveal. To that end, Shaw's liner notes support non-literal engagement.

The initial experience of “Moss” is akin to finding oneself situated somewhere inside a canopy of moss. Mossy qualities surround the listener, and the listener has no trouble making sense of where they find themselves. Over time, those qualities are torn from the depicted object and replaced by far stranger ones, which the listener must attempt to reconcile. In doing so, the reality of the moss becomes something troubling, more distant, yet seems immediately present

(*brilliance*). The unexpected dominant seventh harmony in measure 12 may signal the listener's surprise at finding themselves already enacting the mysterious reality of the object depicted (*phantasia* and *transport*).²⁹⁷

Stem

“The trunk of this evergreen tree reaches to the sky, but not in a straight line. Its strength is apparent, but it is not without curves and bends and lumps and the residue of decades.”²⁹⁸ This is how Shaw invites listeners to contemplate the second movement, “Stem.” The movement features four sections: an introduction (0:00–0:42), two highly syncopated sections (0:43–2:02 and 2:03–2:41, respectively) and a coda (2:42 on).

Unlike trunk, which suggests something grounded, hardened, fixed, or immovable, “Stem” suggests something more mutable, more fragile. Morton refers to objects as fragile because they are both themselves (real) and not-themselves (sensual).²⁹⁹ This is the tension that, throughout the work, appears to interest Shaw. Shaw contrasts the inherent fragility of the stem with its resilience across time. The stem appears strong but in reality is something fragile. With the exception of the consecutive fifths during the “apex” of the movement (2:03), everything in “Stem” either wavers, hesitates, or stalls. “Stem” brings to light the vulnerability of life forms

²⁹⁷ Measure 5 signals the first instance of harmonic movement, with the cello's shift from D down to C. Measure 5 also establishes F major as the implied harmonic center throughout the section (reinforced by the harmony in measure 11).

²⁹⁸ *Evergreen*, liner notes.

²⁹⁹ “In order to exist, objects must be fragile. This sounds obvious but when we think the deep ontological reasons why, it becomes quite mysterious. It turns out that objects are dying around us all the time, even as they give birth to other objects. An object's sensuality is an elegy to its disappearance.” Morton, *Realist Magic*, 188. *Fragility* is the principal term in Chapter 4 of *Realist Magic*.

and of all objects. In a gesture that may be called environmentally empathetic, the movement fuses delicate traits to an ostensibly stalwart trunk.

One may be tempted to reduce “Stem” to thematic and symbolic notions of support or transport, but the movement resists reduction to any literal, functional role as support for the following movement (“Water”) or the rest of the work by inviting the listener to reflect on the stem as something deeper than its perpetual growth. The movement depicts the stem as non-teleological. While on the surface the movement privileges ideas of continuity and presence, it is up to the listener (perhaps even in retrospect, as I suggest below) to reconcile that continuity without orientation toward a goal. The movement asks its listener to enact the stem as duration rather than form, which means its form remains uncertain, withdrawn. The process of continual development conceals the thing that is developing.

“Stem” pairs musical gestures which suggest development, ascension, and forward momentum (continuity) with strange or surprising qualities. The movement’s musical depiction of the stem is non-literal as the listener participates in enacting those gestures and their associated qualities—as far as the listener enacts musical tropes of expansion, growth, and development in unusual ways. In the end, the listener may realize that it was not development *to* anything but development *for no reason*. Morton describes the aesthetic experience associated with ecologically explicit art as solidarity with nonhumans brought to the foreground, “a feeling of alreadiness, for no reason in particular, with no agenda in particular.”³⁰⁰

Regarding the two highly syncopated sections in which the entire ensemble is present, Shaw writes: “The interlocking rhythms of the four players depend on each other in order to propel forward without falling apart. We sometimes turn to the metaphor of the machine to

³⁰⁰ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 73.

describe these kinds of rhythms, but maybe the machine as metaphor is just a crutch of language. The stem of our existence is an organic braid, made of intertwined designs as we move through the world.”³⁰¹ The listener is not an isolated, distant observer to the interlocking rhythms but a key participant in their liveliness. It is the listener who reconciles the lively, roaming, searching qualities of the stem, and enacts its reality. The interlocking rhythms *transport* the dynamic life of the stem into the listener, who brings it to life.

The coda (2:42 on) is the most dramatic and important passage in the movement. With its denser texture, the coda suggests a moment of structural maturity—the point at which the stem, now more substantial, is capable of stabilizing the entire system it supports. But finality is withheld and the music gestures outward. To hear the coda as merely transitional (to “Water” or the rest of the movement) is to ignore its physicality. “Stem” does not actually *end* (according to the score) but disappears for “Water” to take its place (*transport*). The “end” of the movement suggests that the unbounded growth of the stem continues without a beholder around to observe it, an environmentally empathetic effect that Shaw reuses for “Root” (although the effect there differs in a few ways). The movement ends and the listener, at least for a moment, becomes aware of continuity *without* presence. The presence of the stem is *not* the stem. Shaw writes: “A tree’s growth, like any living thing’s growth and existence, is a balance of many different processes working together. Interlocking patterns of chemical and physical changes that deliver nutrients through the body as it reaches toward an end that even the most sentient living beings cannot know or understand.”³⁰²

³⁰¹ *Evergreen*, liner notes.

³⁰² *Evergreen*, liner notes.

The Attaca Quartet's recording presents a deliberate seven-second pause before the first note of "Water," which subverts any sense of seamless continuity and accentuates the individuality of the movement, but ruins the compositional idea found in the score. One can imagine a recording that does not solve the physical challenge that the score poses in such a pragmatic way but takes advantage of digital editing tools to make the change from "Stem" to "Water" instantaneous (*attaca*, as instructed). The effect would be unrealistic (a live quartet cannot make the change so quickly) but it would be more faithful to the compositional idea, which, according to the score, does not involve a smooth elision but a shock, comparable to the kind one experiences when unexpectedly drenched in water.

Water

When I was walking, and not walking, in this forest, everything was wet. It doesn't snow very often there, but a small blizzard had come through a few days before. The snow had almost fully melted when I came through the woods that morning, so the sound of water dripping was all around. There's a strange sense of depth, optically, when you're in the woods in the morning. The way light is filtered through various greens near and far, the parallax motion of vertical tree trunks at different distances. Aurally I experienced the same thing. The clarity of the water droplets' tones in the foreground and the ghostliness of those further away. The alluring chaos of their random punctuation. The spectral din that reminds you: far and near are all around.³⁰³

If there is a middle to *The Evergreen*, it is the third movement. Morton argues that *the feeling of being in the middle* is "precisely the feeling of being caught or suspended in a multiplicity of rhythms."³⁰⁴ "Water" comprises four independent rhythmic parts all sounding simultaneously. The most basic rhythm, though, is the gap between an object and its own qualities, and it is this rhythm that "Water" invites its listeners to enact.

³⁰³ *Evergreen*, liner notes.

³⁰⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 154.

“Water” is a process. It is water persisting, continuing, existing. It is the only movement of the four that strives for literal depiction. Despite this, “Water” thoroughly reveals its eponymous object as *brilliant*, something that the other three movements do only in particular instances (passages in which the depicted objects “break down” in some way). Theatricality and allure both suggest an object clashing with its qualities. How, then, does “Water” fit with those ideas when it only emphasizes water-like qualities?

Shaw’s description highlights what qualities water lends to other objects (“everything was wet”). “Water” depicts water as something definite, obvious, but something primarily that lends a mood or character to whatever environment it saturates. Water is something recognized by the various moods it can create, or the distinct appearances that it lends to other objects. In other words, water draws attention to itself and other things through its watery qualities, all the while receding into the background of perception. It is both obviously there and not-there simultaneously. As an object of moods, water is *brilliant*. While “Water” is a depiction of an object like the other three movements, it is more accurately a mood-setting movement. This is why Shaw prefaces the movement by highlighting the sense of space that watery moods create, both optically and aurally, and why the movement itself highlights this, too.

After rainfall, or a blizzard, water makes objects shimmer, glow, appear to flicker. Water is an object suspended against other objects. “The Rift between essence and appearance suspends itself against other Rifts,” Morton writes: “*an object persists*.”³⁰⁵ The mood that water creates is a signal of its presence, the persistence of the water-object, its continuity, occasionally brought from its background state to the foreground through the way that it transforms the appearances of other things. What other things? Literally, the movement involves the sounds of water produced

³⁰⁵ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 153.

by the sounds of the instruments. Non-literally, the objects are whatever the listener happens to imagine.

“Water” creates a sense of space through its irregularity, its spontaneity. It suggests the sound of water droplets falling from and interacting with disparate and unknown objects. Water therefore comes to be known indirectly through its interaction with other things. *Space* is the other name for *allure*, and rightly so, since it is the experienced tension between an unknown reality and its perceptible qualities. Despite its superficial depiction of water and evocation of literal imagery, “Water” produces alluring tension insofar as its beholder is compelled to imagine or question what the water may be encountering or changing—what effects all this wateriness may be having on other things (*phantasia*), like the other parts of the evergreen itself. Tension arises somewhere between depiction and implication. The movement gestures toward the sensory presence of water but withholds any clear sense of environment or object of contact. It is resonance without a source, a state of suspension, of wonder or speculation about the nature of water—water divorced from any explicit interaction with other objects but nevertheless made present through its interaction with unknown, imaginary ones. “Water” draws attention to the fact that water, like any object, is not separable from its appearances, yet is not reducible to its appearances either.

Suspension is the effect of moving while standing still, stasis in movement.³⁰⁶ The steady, four-beat pulse on which the players depend for some sense of organization in performance is the point on which the alluring chaos of random punctuation depends. The Attaca Quartet captures the feeling of an underlying pulse, although one can imagine a performance in which that underlying pulse is lost or neglected for a greater sense of spontaneity. Analogously, the pulse

³⁰⁶ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 154–56.

demonstrates the definite objecthood of water, while the surrounding improvised parts allude to those unspecifiable qualities of water that draw attention to other things (*clarity*).

Root

What inflects the unfurling stem of one's life as it draws time up from our roots through our twisted, articulated limbs and sprouts and blooms and leaves and surfaces and planes and points and chords and lines and tunes and angles and tangents and folds and peaks and valleys and accents and cadences and timbres and knots and burls and skin and grain and dust and breath and vapor and the memories of those who came before?³⁰⁷

Shaw's polysyndetic description mirrors the general wandering feeling of the last movement. "Root" asks listeners to hear the slowly unfolding growth of the roots as they make their way down—as they struggle downward, past other things within the soil, unfurling, unfolding, continuously, their harmony amongst one another, their twisting over each other, connecting with one another, working together, finding their place in the soil. Dissonant chords provide impediments to the progress of the roots. The wandering effect of the ostinato pattern throughout is easily ruined without careful variations in bowing and articulation by the cellist.

Endings are symmetrical in that they feature consistency. In tonal music a feeling of closure occurs when some musical element (texture, harmony, rhythm) becomes consistent. "Root" achieves closure through its repetition of lines. This repetition not only unifies the movement but also evokes the resolution characteristic of musical closure, where predictability itself becomes expressive.

A more conventional listening hears the cello's part in "Root" as simply *the lowest part* of the piece (literally the "roots" of the movement). But the cello's part constitutes the primary source of imagery in the movement. Therefore, the movement reverses the usual purpose of an

³⁰⁷ *Evergreen*, liner notes.

ostinato pattern. The pattern is not literal accompaniment, merely supplemental to something “above” it. When the upper parts do come into play, they attempt to disrupt the smooth continuation of the ostinato pattern. It is the “melodic content” that is supplemental here, that lends qualities to the object of contemplation. The roots adopt the qualities of the upper parts. The question is, then, what happens to the listener who takes part in performing their existence?

As the Attaca Quartet plays it, the movement lasts approximately eight minutes. There is, in general, a melancholy or stoic mood to the movement. The roots take their place within the soil, sentient but unfeeling. The movement lacks the traditional musical material required for a finale. But following the previous three movements, the movement is conclusive in that it presents the most emotionally vulnerable and direct musical material in the entire work. Sharp dissonances cut through the cello’s winding Alberti bass pattern, the roots themselves. Each burst from the strings is like a question. The upper parts imitate the lilting rhythm of the roots. Occasionally, the pattern becomes almost dance-like, starting, stopping, and restarting. Around 3:40 the harmony is hopeful—an extraordinary moment if the listener hopes or feels pride as a nonhuman thing. The roots make their way down through the soil in a polite manner, as if excusing themselves for their intrusion (the nonhuman participating in an ecological mode, in ecological awareness).

The harmonic and melodic content generated by the upper parts throughout the movement help it waver between sadness and hopefulness, but the roots proceed without those feelings. Sadness is projected onto something that cannot be sad. The harmonic and melodic components of the movement are superficial, literally on the surface. On one level, the movement asks for “compassion” for their growth. On another level, the movement places the listener within the uneven patterns of that growth which is neither sad nor melancholy but only

is. The movement invites the listener to appreciate the existence of something that grows without end. The movement's anthropomorphizing of the roots means that the listener is found locked in the tension between whether it is anthropomorphism or not. Can one perceive the roots' progress without the temptation of anthropomorphism? This is what "Root" asks of its listener.

Like "Stem," "Root" has no real conclusion. Its ending involves the contemplation of a process left behind. The fade-out does to the listener what roots do. The movement ends wherever it happens to end. With regard to the evergreen depicted by the work, there are at least two ways to interpret the ending of *The Evergreen* (the ending of "Root"). Morton writes that *to end* is "to coincide with one's sensual appearance," and that *ending* "brings to light the withdrawnness of the thing."³⁰⁸ The latter means that the object becomes consistent with its sensual qualities—it becomes an object with no surplus beyond the imagination of the beholder. The evergreen "dies" as it returns to its origin, silence (its status prior to the beholder's encounter with the musical translation).

The second way is to say that the evergreen depicted is left to its own existence, independent of thought or perception. The fade-out at the end of the work indicates that the sensual object generated by the four movements is *not* the object, only a translation. The source of awe is the silence that follows: the evergreen, alone, and absent. At the moment of ending, the listener may come to recognize that the work was an illusion, a mere translation of a real evergreen, but in that recognition the evergreen is revealed: the gap between its essence and appearance is made explicit. The evergreen both is and is not *The Evergreen*. The inconclusiveness of the movement reinforces the elusiveness of the objects depicted (the roots and the tree itself).

³⁰⁸ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 188.

The end of “Root” leaves one in a position to care about the tree in a nonviolent way, by leaving it alone. Or perhaps it is the opposite. Morton writes “Since everything depends upon everything else, we have a very powerful argument for caring about things.”³⁰⁹ Music depends on its listener. Caring for it is analogous to the listener’s sincere absorption with it, out of which emerges theatricality (provided the music creates new tensions between objects and their qualities) or object-oriented mimesis. Care is what brings the evergreen to life, is what sustains its existence, and what ultimately leaves it alone to exist independently. The total experience of Shaw’s work can be understood as a caring-for the evergreen it depicts. It is the listener’s attention that sustains its existence. But if *to exist* means *exist independently*, as OOO suggests, then why would something need care at all? Care is the necessary ingredient for coexistence.

To *perform* the moss that surrounds or covers a tree, its delicate stems, the dripping water that feeds it, or its roots, which wind their way beneath the surface—to perform or enact those things is to *be* those things in whatever manner an object may suggest.³¹⁰ The first movement *is* the reality of moss; the second movement *is* growth; the third movement *is* the irregular dripping of water, and the fourth *is* the wandering of the roots beneath the soil. If they are not, then the listener has not encountered those things, since those objects must be executed by the listener.³¹¹

³⁰⁹ Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 35.

³¹⁰ Harman writes: “To perform or enact something is to *be* it, which means that any literal description of such performance is nothing better than a translation.” Harman, *Art and Objects*, 142. To “perform something in the OOO sense means to be it in a hidden and essential sense that no outside understanding can ever exhaust.” Harman, *Art and Objects*, 142. Analogously, a tree “performing” photosynthesis is *being* a photosynthesizing organism.

³¹¹ With respect to the importance of the concept of mimesis to ecocriticism, it would be convenient to refer to this as *object-oriented mimesis*, to differentiate it from other kinds. See Harman, “A New Sense of Mimesis,” in *Aesthetics Equals Politics: New Discourses across Art, Architecture, and Philosophy*, ed. Mark Foster Gage, (The MIT Press, 2019), 49–64. Harman does not actually use the phrase “object-oriented mimesis.” As far as I know, no one has used that phrase when referring to what Harman calls theatricality. Unlike classical mimesis, for instance, which involves producing copies of things that exist “in nature,” object-oriented mimesis means that the beholder *becomes* the object. The claim is both a phenomenological and an ontological one. The beholder does not literally transform into the object, of course, but enters that object’s mode of being. Each movement of the work presents its

It is the listener who brings them to life, the listener who executes their reality in the manner suggested to them. Since the evergreen withdraws behind its *brilliance*, it is the listener who must enact its reality. It is the listener, in the end, who is the evergreen. *The Evergreen* therefore asks: What is easier than letting something be just what it is? Or perhaps this is a difficult task given that it represents the opposite of indifference?

The Evergreen appears in the mode of the sublime. The work presents radical (sublime) translations of four evergreen-related objects with the goal of bringing into listener into closer contact with that object via speculation. Objects are *brilliant* when depicted in glaringly obvious, yet alluring ways, such as the opening measures of “Moss” or the entirety of “Water.” They appear with *clarity* when their apparent palpability is matched with qualities impervious to description, like passages in “Stem.” *Transport* means the object becomes explicitly evident to the beholder (“Root”), while *phantasia* means that the object inspires the contemplation of qualities as objects themselves (“Water”).

Concluding remarks

The Evergreen portrays the evergreen itself as something simultaneously absent and present, an object hidden despite being the focus of attention. The work can be taken as an object-oriented recognition that any attempt to gain access to an object through direct reduction is doomed. *The Evergreen* asserts that reality is only indirectly accessible. Objects are both themselves (withdrawn) and not-themselves (*sensual* for their beholders). The evergreen is present as far as the listeners observe it indirectly via its component parts (its moss, stem, water, and roots), insofar as those parts ultimately allude to that larger, encompassing object. It is absent in the

titular object as an alluring object, an object that stands apart from its qualities. The listener enacts the withdrawn reality of those missing objects, reconciling themselves to whatever distant qualities still hover about.

sense that those parts form the basis of the listener's experience (but even those parts, too, withdraw).

Shaw's work puts distance between the evergreen-object and its qualities, its constituent parts, and those parts and their own qualities. Moss is depicted as something deeper and more mysterious than its surface-level features; the stem of the tree eludes any sense of purpose; water sounds without a source, and roots wander stoically. Listeners encounter each movement as part of that object and, from a broader perspective, those parts become qualities of the evergreen itself. It also puts distance between that object and its exact environmental conditions—its original context, or its place somewhere in the forests of Galiano Island. The object to which the work alludes is *that particular* evergreen, *any* evergreen, or *every* evergreen. The object becomes a matter of uncertainty, a question, totally ambiguous, precisely how OOO characterizes real objects. The evergreen is made to stand on its own without its familiar background, an uncanny sonic portrait.³¹² From another interpretive standpoint, it is the evergreen that serves as the background for the objects each movement of the work depicts, yet those too can be said to stand alone against their own qualities.³¹³

Passages in *The Evergreen* that are initially perceived as literal may, upon closer inspection, be perceived as non-literal. Indeed, it seems that a major point of interpretive musical analysis is to enrich future listener experiences with whatever musical object is the target of that analysis, to provide some kind of knowledge that may transform otherwise literal passages into

³¹² It is certainly the case that *theory*, like *allure*, is also capable of producing feelings of awe and wonder.

³¹³ *The Evergreen* brings its eponymous object into the realm of abstract sound where one may be tempted to say that *any* object is inevitably de-literalized. But that belief may rightly be called ocularcentric, for it wrongly assumes that hearing is somehow inferior or less accurate than vision as far as access to objects is concerned—as if *seeing* somehow grants greater access to reality than *listening*. But there are no greater or lesser translations, only translations (therefore, the phrase “nonhuman point of view” really must be understood in its broadest sense). One can speak of the intensity of OOO tensions, however, and this is where the distinction between literal and non-literal experience comes into play. Some metaphors *are* stronger than others.

(more) non-literal ones, or to point out the inherent ambiguity or weirdness of musical objects (the gap between reality and its appearances), especially seemingly banal ones. In other words, to draw attention to the meaningfulness of the music as opposed to its meaning. Such endeavors are consistent with object-oriented thought, and ultimately favorable for any ecocritical approach that seeks to cultivate coexistence, or any approach that seeks to appreciate the individuality of a given object without suggesting that it can be reduced to its smaller parts or effects.

The Evergreen is both a real object in its own right and a sensual avatar, a translation, of a real evergreen somewhere in Canada. The work invites reflection on the gathering of four discrete objects, reflecting any regular encounter with an evergreen. One never grasps the evergreen all at once, but perceives its various shifting features and qualities. *The Evergreen* effectively reflects an encounter with an evergreen and in doing so accurately draws attention to its irreducibility—the tension between the tree and its qualities, between the tree and its parts, between those parts and their own qualities, and so on. The work effectively illustrates how ecological music can effectively bring about ecological awareness through its non-literal handling of environmentally relevant topics and environmental objects.

Theatricality can be helpfully understood as a form of coexistence. Alluring objects call upon their beholders to enact their reality. But alluring tension is not exclusive to human beings since it constitutes the very mechanism of causation. The implications of this for music studies, especially the ecocritical kind, are significant. For one thing, it means that a human beholder's perception of qualities with respect to a missing object (as in the case of metaphor, for example) is no different in kind from the perception of those qualities by some nonhuman thing. Both may perceive those qualities differently, of course, but both participate in the same object-quality tension, an observation that is not meant to collapse useful distinctions between humans and

nonhumans but rather point to the fact that ontological distinctions between humans and nonhumans are not helpful from any genuine ecological standpoint. Music, in turn, ends up providing a particularly rich site for staging those distinctions as open problems rather than fixed categories, for examining how those distinctions may be brought into question by art.

I argued that the objects that *The Evergreen* depicts are sublime. Speculation about the reality of objects through “radical” translations of those objects equates to *allure* and in the case of art, which entails theatricality, that speculation involves both distance and intimacy. Distance refers to the fact that the object enacted by the beholder remains withdrawn (*brilliance, clarity*) while intimacy refers to the fact that the reality of that object *seems* to be *right there* (*transport, phantasia*), since the beholder participates in executing its reality themselves. *Brilliance* and *clarity* characterize *allure* while *transport* and *phantasia* help describe the consequences of that tension. A major implication of the object-oriented sublime not discussed here is that encounters with sublime objects extend to nonhuman things, too (the four tensions describe the structure of *all* objects and their interactions). Other terms would likely be more conducive to discussions about nonhuman-music interactions or nonhuman-nonhuman interactions, but the appropriateness of such terms is best left to the discretion of the analyst. The significance of Morton’s object-oriented sublime is that it recognizes and maintains the autonomy of objects and therefore provides a useful ecological model for conceptualizing a non-anthropocentric sublime. It also provides a model for characterizing the four tensions within studies of musical aesthetics.

In one interview, Shaw stated “people are more important than music,” a sentiment that underscores the importance of remembering those who make the music possible along with the collaborative efforts involved.³¹⁴ One can also interpret that statement more plainly as a reminder

³¹⁴ Rebecca Lentjes, “Meaning in the Parentheticals: An Interview with Caroline Shaw,” *VAN Magazine*, July 1, 2021.

that music makes connections between people possible, and music is just one bridge among many others. But the sentiment lends itself to an object-oriented reading, too, since OOO's theory of art demands a human beholder for art to happen at all. Moreover, OOO obfuscates the line between human and nonhuman. "People" may no longer refer to human beings but may be radically re-interpreted from an ecological perspective to include plants, trees, forests, violins, bottles, clouds, wind turbines, or metro trains.³¹⁵ Theatricality (or what I also called object-oriented mimesis here) involves re-arranging the distance between one's self and other people, other objects, which could be the moss that pervades a forest floor, the fragile stems of trees, water that seeps into those stems and feeds them, or the invisible roots which form a part of the ground on which one stands. This suggests that what music is *about* has to do with *what it does to you*. Following OOO's critique of overmining, though, figuring out what it does to you must be understood as indirectly touching on what the music *is*.

Thinking ecologically means accepting a contradiction: something is simultaneously individuated yet part of something else. Holism is inevitable when it comes to ecological discussions. The question is, what kind of wholes is one actually talking about? *The whole is greater than the sum of its parts*. This kind of holism is really a kind of violence against parts, the implication being that the whole is somehow *more real* than the parts. But OOO insists that things always exist in the same way. *The Evergreen* is not an attempt to illustrate holism but to appreciate that the whole is always *less* than the sum of its parts.³¹⁶ With its consistent oscillation between literal and non-literal experience, *The Evergreen* encourages listeners to acknowledge

³¹⁵ "[T]he ethics of the ecological thought is to regard beings as people even when they aren't people." Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 8. Morton also suggests that ecological art is "art that treats objects as people without a concept of Nature." Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 110.

³¹⁶ Morton calls this *subscendence*: Morton, "Subscendence," *e-flux journal* 85 (October 2017), accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/156375/subscendence>.

that objects remain inconsistent in relation to themselves. Allowing objects to remain inconsistent is a fundamentally nonviolent act, an ecological one.³¹⁷

On the surface, *The Evergreen* looks like an attempt to undermine its eponymous object. However, as I have argued, the work can and should be understood as an anti-undermining work. *The Evergreen* adheres to the very idea of an object-oriented piece of art. The work consists of objects within objects, depictions within depictions, imagery within imagery. With its emphasis on wholes versus parts, objects versus their qualities, and indirect access to things, Shaw's work is decidedly an object-oriented one. And if, as Morton writes, ecological thinking means "acknowledging in a deep way the existence of beings that aren't you, with whom you co-exist," then Shaw's work makes that thinking more palpable.³¹⁸ *The Evergreen* succeeds in Shaw's personal goal as a musician of "trying to imagine a world of sound that has never been heard before but has always existed."³¹⁹

³¹⁷ "By allowing objects to remain inconsistent, rather than reducing them to appearances (for me), I act nonviolently." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 71. This *leaving-alone* of objects is a Heideggerian notion that Morton reads ethically.

³¹⁸ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 79.

³¹⁹ "Bio," Caroline Shaw, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://carolineshaw.com/bio/>.

CHAPTER 3: “To be (at all) is to be in (some) place”: John Luther Adams and Music as Place(-making)

“Reality is always larger, richer and more complex than our ideas about it.”³²⁰

Introduction

In his memoir *Silences So Deep* (2020), John Luther Adams recalls that after encountering the film version of Glenn Gould’s *The Idea of North* (1967), he began dreaming of traveling in northern Canada and Alaska.³²¹ His first trip to Alaska was in the summer of 1975 and he would go on to live there for thirty-six years, from 1978 to 2014. “I sought and found my spiritual home in Alaska,” Adams writes in one of his many essays.³²² In *The Idea of North*, the first part of his *Solitude Trilogy*, a radio documentary series about isolated places, Gould observes that something happens to people who go north (toward the Arctic Circle): “They become, in effect, philosophers.”³²³

³²⁰ John Luther Adams, *The Place Where You Go to Listen: In Search of an Ecology of Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 103.

The quotation in the title of this chapter is Edward S. Casey’s modified translation of what he refers to as the Archytan axiom (after Archytas of Tarentum): Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (University of California Press, 1998), 4.

³²¹ Adams, *Silences So Deep: Music, Solitude, Alaska* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 17. Regarding its description as a memoir, Adams remarked in one interview: “I hesitate to call it a memoir because it’s always struck me that memoirs are written by truly famous people: politicians or movie stars or people who have done something extraordinary.” Molly Sheridan, “John Luther Adams: The Music of a True Place,” *NewMusicBox* March 1, 2011, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/john-luther-adams-the-music-of-a-true-place/>.

Adams mentioned Gould’s *Solitude Trilogy* in at least one interview before his memoir was published: Steven Schick, “Inuksuit (JLA and Steven Shick [sic]),” 2009, <https://www.johnlutheradams.net/interviews/7>.

³²² Adams, *Winter Music: Composing the North* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 8.

³²³ Glenn Gould, *The Solitude Trilogy: Three Sound Documentaries* (CBC Records, 1992), CD.

Adams's earliest works, composed after he graduated from the California Institute of the Arts in 1973, where his composition teachers included James Tenney and Leonard Stein, represent early versions of his interest in conceptual and environmentally-oriented works. *songbirdsongs* (1974–80), his second major work, is a collection of nine short pieces for piccolo, ocarina, and percussion, that translates the sounds of bird calls. *Night Peace* (1976), composed shortly after his first visit to Alaska, perhaps in response to that visit, is a work for antiphonal choirs, solo soprano, harp, and percussion, which Adams notes was “conceived in the luminous still of a moon-less winter night.”³²⁴ Adams suggests that *The Far Country of Sleep* (1988), one of his first large-scale works for orchestra, which he composed in memory of Morton Feldman, evokes in his mind “both the distant dreamscapes of the Arctic and that ultimate wilderness, through which we all must pass.”³²⁵

In the early nineties, after living in Alaska for more than a decade, Adams began presenting lectures in which he described the influence of that place on his music. These lectures culminated in his essay “Resonance of Place” (1994), in which he explained how, with his work for orchestra, harp, and string quartet *Dream In White On White* (1992), he wished “to move away from music *about* place, toward music that *is* place.”³²⁶ He sought “to create a musical landscape with an essential coherence in some way equivalent to the wholeness of a real place; music that conveys its own inherently musical sense of place.”³²⁷ Adams called this *sonic*

³²⁴ “Night Peace | John Luther Adams,” Wise Music Classical, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/57055/Night-Peace--John-Luther-Adams/>.

³²⁵ “The Far Country of Sleep | John Luther Adams,” Wise Music Classical, accessed April 10, 2026, <http://wisemusicclassical.com/work/57020/The-Far-Country-of-Sleep--John-Luther-Adams/>.

³²⁶ Adams, *Winter Music*, 15.

³²⁷ Adams, *Winter Music*, 16.

geography (a term he coined himself): music that is not merely evocative or representative of place but *is* place.

One only needs to glance over a list of Adams's works to see that place plays a significant role in his musical thinking.³²⁸ Some titles make the work's connection to place obvious, like *The Wind in High Places* (2011), *the place we began* (2008), *Three High Places* (2007), *The Place Where You Go to Listen* (2006), *In a Treeless Place, Only Snow* (2001), or *The Farthest Place* (2001). In others, an idea of place is present but implicitly so: *Vespers of the Blessed Earth* (2021), *Among Red Mountains* (2001), *In the White Silence* (1998), *Earth and the Great Weather* (1990–93), *Dream In White On White* (1992), and *The Far Country of Sleep* (1988). Earth itself, red mountains, white silence, a dream, a far country—these titles all allude to some place; they are meant to evoke the qualities of some place.³²⁹

The idea of landscape is incidental, but not irrelevant. Adams uses both terms, landscape and place, but not interchangeably. This subtle distinction is significant because it invites reconsideration of critical responses that commend Adams's music for its (sometimes supposed) depictions of landscapes or its capacity to create "sonic landscapes." In fact, as this chapter will suggest, this distinction cuts across all music. It is place that brings with it notions of openness and spatiality and therefore landscape. Place is the fundamental concern.

Kyle Gann, Steven Schick and Glenn Kotche all refer to Adams's music as "sonic landscapes" in their essays for the volume of Adams scholarship, *The Farthest Place*: see Kyle Gann, "Time at the End of the World: The Orchestral Tetralogy of John Luther Adams," in *The Farthest Place: The Music of John Luther Adams*, edited by Bernd Herzogenrath (Northeastern University Press, 2012), 68; Steven Schick, "Strange Noise, Sacred Places," in *The Farthest Place*, 92; and Glenn Kotche, "The Thunder That Smokes," in *The Farthest Place*, 118.

George Grella writes that Adams's work is "a response to his own personal experience of the natural environment, which he recreates with some specific and colorful details while mainly turning it into a *landscape of sound* [emphasis added]." George Grella, "The Sonic Geography of John Luther Adams," *Bandcamp*, September 18, 2023, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/lists/the-sonic-geography-of-john-luther-adams>. Tom Service commends Adams's work *In the White Silence* because it "makes you part of the ecology of a musical landscape, a sounding metaphor for a deep engagement with the natural environment." Tom Service, "Musical activism: Greenpeace Is Not the First," *The Guardian*, August 4, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/tomserviceblog/2015/aug/04/musical-activism-greenpeace-is-not-the-first>.

³²⁸ A complete list of Adams's works is available on his website: <https://www.johnlutheradams.net/works>.

³²⁹ Titles play no insignificant role in guiding aesthetic experience. They often do considerable work for a beholder. Even titles like *Dark Waves*, *Become Ocean*, *Waves and Particles*, or *Darkness and Scattered Light* can guide a beholder to qualities the composer may wish the listener to associate with the musical work or experience. Levinson, "Titles."

Adams's fascination with place has spanned and shaped his entire musical career: "My life's work," Adams wrote in a 2001 article for *NewMusicBox*, "is grounded in two passions: music and place."³³⁰ Adams expressed a similar sentiment in an essay he wrote for the December 2024 issue of *Orion Magazine*: "For me, places become music and music becomes place."³³¹ To understand the importance of place to Adams, it is necessary to investigate *how* Adams thinks about place, how he conceives of place in relation to music or music in relation to place. The relationship between music and place according to Adams is the central theme of this chapter.

In this chapter, I analyze what Adams has said about *music and place*, and *music as place*, through the lens of OOO. One finds Adams's thoughts about both topics in statements regarding a handful of other topics which orbit those closely. By addressing those other individually, I show how Adams conceives of place. The first is the concept of sonic geography, the idea of music *as* place. The second is an idea of translation (already mentioned above in relation to *songbirdsongs*). As luck would have it, Adams's use of this term parallels Harman's use of it in his most technical texts. Harman employs "translation" (sometimes "caricature," "distortion," or "transformation") as a term to describe real-sensual object relations and aesthetic mediation.³³² Third is the role of Alaska, the place that has exerted the most profound and enduring influence on Adams's artistic vision and compositional practice.

³³⁰ Adams, "Getting Inside the Music," *NewMusicBox*, February 1, 2001, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/getting-inside-the-music/>. Daniel Grimley suggests something similar about Frederick Delius, although Delius's interest in place is not imbued with the same philosophical spirit as Adams's. Percussionist and conductor Steven Schick, who has engaged extensively with Adams and his work, asserts that "very few composers have ever been more associated with any place than John has been with Alaska." Schick, "Strange Noise, Sacred Places," 79.

³³¹ Adams continues: "Listening to a place, learning to hear its music, I come to understand more deeply where I am and how I fit in. In my music, I aspire to provoke for myself and for listeners the experience of standing alone, immersed in a vast, beautiful, sometimes frightening place, and losing oneself within it. This is a hopelessly romantic aspiration." Adams, "The Liminal Line: Remembering Barry Lopez," December 26, 2024, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-liminal-line/>.

³³² Harman, *The Quadruple Object*. Morton borrows the term for the same purpose: "Causality is much better thought of as translation." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 83. Bruno Latour employed the term "translation" to refer to a

In keeping with the philosophical theme of this dissertation, I approach many of Adams's thoughts and ideas as inherently philosophical (in that they imply metaphysical speculation). What metaphysics is suited to Adams's particular way of thinking about music, art, aesthetics, place, and nonhuman things? My work here demonstrates that Adams's thoughts about those topics find ground within OOO. (Actually, their alignment with OOO's understanding of those same topics is so convenient that it may raise questions about the underlying theoretical affinities.³³³) What emerges is a new understanding of Adams's creative work, its relation to place, and implications for the concept of place within (eco)musicological discourse. This chapter contributes to discussions in music studies broadly by offering new insights into the ontological structure of place as it manifests in and through music-related practices.

Adams is a composer, not a philosopher, but his idea of "music as place" raises at least one metaphysical question: What *is* place?³³⁴ Adams's thoughts about music as place often imply a notion of music as something in which listeners find themselves (ontologically, not unexpectedly). In a 2021 interview, Adams remarked: "I want to get lost in the music. I want to be inside of it, I want it to be all around me and beneath me and above me. I want to get hopelessly lost in it. That's what I want for myself, and that's what I want for you, as a

kind of mediation or modification of *actors*: Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Harvard University Press, 1988). Latour refers to "chains of translations" or "translation chains," and at one point emphasizes that translation is by definition always a misunderstanding (Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 42 and 65), but the term carries more weight for Latour than it does for Harman: see note 16 in Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 253.

³³³ Adams is familiar with the work of at least two important twentieth-century philosophers: Yi-Fu Tuan and José Ortega y Gasset. The latter has been Harman's inspiration since he was a teenager.

³³⁴ The question of place puts us, as listeners, in question, too. It is therefore a metaphysical question. This is how Heidegger identifies metaphysical questions in his famous 1929 inaugural lecture in Freiburg, "What is Metaphysics?" Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics" in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 93–94.

listener.”³³⁵ For Adams, place is something not merely evoked or represented by music. Place is integral to musical works, and not only his own. OOO’s theory of art does justice to Adams’s artistic visions and goals: a listener is an “ingredient” in the musical work.³³⁶ Adams’s idea of music as place suggests another intriguing question: What if music created new, real places, and not only helped listeners imagine them?

How, then, to articulate Adams’s challenging idea, to formulate music *as* place and not merely evocative or representative of place as such? Moreover, what role might place then play in (eco)musicological discourse? While ideas of nature, environment, and landscape are central to ecomusicological discourse specifically, place deserves equal attention, not least since those concepts presuppose some underlying notion of place. What can place do for thinking ecologically about music and for thinking about music as ecological? These are the larger questions that guide this chapter.

The question “What is place?” is one that has puzzled philosophers since Ancient Greece.³³⁷ The path I take here is relatively straightforward, however, and it proceeds along this route: First, I examine how scholars have discussed place within ecomusicology. In the same section, I examine how scholars have discussed ideas of place in relation to Adams’s music. In the next section, I formulate an object-oriented understanding of place (place as an object), and propose a set of “overall qualities” that can define its ontological character.³³⁸ For the rest of the

³³⁵ Carlton Wilkinson, “Becoming JLA,” *Brunswick Group*, December 8, 2021, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240530063618/https://www.brunswickgroup.com/media/9187/br22johnlutheradams.pdf>.

³³⁶ Harman, “A New Sense of Mimesis,” 60–61.

³³⁷ For the most comprehensive overview of place within philosophy, see Casey, *The Fate of Place*.

³³⁸ By overall qualities I mean identifiable features that can help define an object-oriented place, and not its *real* qualities, which, by definition, remain inaccessible. Morton uses the same phrase to refer to the properties of

chapter, I turn to the question of what place is to Adams himself. I divide my investigation of this question into a few separate parts: “Resonance of Place,” sonic geography, translation, landscape, and finally Alaska, in which the previous topics coalesce. I conclude with some remarks about Adams’s installation project, *The Place Where You Go to Listen*. Ultimately, I argue that Adams’s thoughts about place gain clarity through OOO, and that Adams’s body of musical works is, generally speaking, best characterized as object-oriented, at least with respect to its emphasis on place.

Through analysis of Adams’s published writings, statements, and program notes—along with interviews, reception history, critical commentary, and other analyses of his music—I demonstrate that OOO provides the appropriate theoretical framework for understanding Adams’s philosophy of music, which is rooted, first and foremost, in place (and which is of interest here due to its ecological character). My work here sheds new light on Adams’s philosophical notion of sonic geography (music as place), an idea that has been discussed by other scholars, but not in any authentically philosophical sense. This chapter therefore also represents the first systematic exploration of Adams’s philosophy of music, which remains impenetrable without an investigation into his understanding of place.

The Place(s) of Ecomusicology

How has ecomusicological scholarship engaged with place, and how has place been handled in scholarship on Adams and his music? I deal with both of these questions in this section. An overview of the literature here will help clarify the significance of the brief philosophical

hyperobjects. They write that “these qualities provide more and more accurate modes of human attunement.” Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 24.

investigation of place that I undertake in the next section, in relation to Adams's philosophy of music and to place itself.

The work of five scholars represents how ecomusicological scholarship has engaged with place. Denise Von Glahn has examined how works by American composers evoke and represent place, and has shown the significant role music has played throughout American music history in shaping the identity of various places.³³⁹ Similarly, Daniel Grimley has explored what he calls a “typology of place” in the music of Frederick Delius and has argued that Delius's music involves representations of place that ultimately shape the identities of those places represented.³⁴⁰ Sabine Feisst has surveyed how Alaskan landscapes shaped six of Adams's musical works and how the composer's concept of sonic geography supports analytical engagement with his music.³⁴¹ Tore Størvold has examined music's capacity to both make and *remake* place.³⁴² Lastly, Holly Watkins

³³⁹ Von Glahn, *Music and the Skillful Listener*; Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape* (Northeastern University Press, 2003); Von Glahn, “Music, Place, and the Everyday Sacred: Libby Larsen and Lessons in Environmental Awareness,” *Contemporary Music Review* 35, no. 3 (2016): 296–317. Elaine Keillor has done similar work for Canada: Elaine Keillor, *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

³⁴⁰ Grimley examines “the different sites or topographies that shape [Delius's] work, and which are shaped in turn by his creative place-making and by the literary, artistic and socio-economic patterns and routines of dwelling and inhabitation through which they are marked. Such places are both physical, concrete locations and also more imaginary sites, distinguished by their own individual quality of being-in-place. Musically, this means searching for signs of music's ‘placefulness’: markers include significant paratextual materials such as titles, subtitles or lyrics, certain forms of structural articulation or sonority, thresholds or other points of suspension, moments of heightened thematic or motivic presentation, stratified textures and the suggestion of multiple temporal layers, and a feeling for the ‘iridescence’ or shimmer identified by Malpas.” Daniel Grimley, *Delius and the Sound of Place* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 20. See also Daniel Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape, and Norwegian Identity* (Boydell Press, 2006).

³⁴¹ Feisst, “Music as Place, Place as Music: The Sonic Geography of John Luther Adams,” in *The Farthest Place*, 23–47.

³⁴² “Iceland,” Størvold writes, “is continually made and remade in a variety of musical performances, each one interacting with and actualizing the social history of the landscape in a new way.” Størvold, *Dissonant Landscapes*, 18.

has construed music as a “virtual environment” (Watkins uses environment synonymously with place) and asserts music’s capacity to emplace its listener in an alternative reality.³⁴³

In ecomusicological scholarship, the idea of place, or what the term “place” implies, varies little from one study to the next. The term usually overlaps with others, like landscape, environment, or geography.³⁴⁴ In general, it can refer to a locale, abode, a particular portion of space, or something geographical. In other words, the term brings with it a great deal of conceptual baggage while carrying all of its definitions at the same time.³⁴⁵ Given the term’s nonspecific usage, it is more helpful to generalize than to narrowly focus on specific instances of

³⁴³ Watkins, “Musical Ecologies of Place and Placelessness,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64 no. 2 (Summer 2011): 404–8. “Music creates a multitude of virtual worlds, or virtual configurations of space and time, that listeners can vicariously experience as alternative forms of embodiment, affect, spirit, thought, or some combination thereof.” Watkins, *Musical Vitalities: Ventures in a Biotic Aesthetics of Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 2.

³⁴⁴ Pedelty, et. al use place and these terms synonymously. This reflects the general usage of the term throughout musicology where a concern with place *as such* is absent. The sole exception to this, perhaps, is the brief overview of place as a philosophical topic in Grimley, *Delius*, 12–19. It goes without saying that philosophy is the primary site for metaphysical speculation, not musicology. My hope is that this chapter demonstrates the significance of (re)examining metaphysical assumptions within music studies, and contributes something of value to that cause.

The authors of the introduction to the volume titled “Music and Landscape” in the *Journal of Musicology* draw a distinction between landscape and place. They note that, “of all the geographical terms available to music studies, landscape is at once the most obvious and the most obscure.” Obvious, perhaps, because traditional formalist approaches tend to view musical works, like landscapes, as a thing-over-there, something to which one can attribute evocative imagery and representational content. Obscure because, as the authors conclude, “in practice” landscape inevitably overlaps with terms like place. I show how that same tendency remains true with respect to place, too, at least in scholarship on Adams. The authors also suggest that the idea of place, in contrast to landscape, “has proved more applicable and more amenable; as a geographical surrogate for the politics of identity, place has been readily accommodated into ethnographic and historical accounts of the ‘music in...’ variety.” This indicates a separate tendency: the tendency to treat place as inherently political and therefore merely a social construct; in other words, something reducible to its effects on other things. Jonathan Hicks, Michael Uy, and Carina Venter, “Introduction: Music and Landscape,” *Journal of Musicology* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 1–10.

Scholars concerned with the face of the environmental humanities (the broader area of the humanities to which ecomusicology can be said to belong) treat environment, landscape, and place as discrete concepts. These terms receive separate entries in Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow, eds., *Keywords for Environmental Studies* (New York University Press, 2016), 93–96, 145–147, and 161–63, respectively.

³⁴⁵ Place specialist Jeff Malpas points out that the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* extends over five pages: Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Routledge, 2018), 21–22.

its appearance from one publication to the next.³⁴⁶ Therefore, I suggest two strains of thought about place within ecomusicological scholarship.

One can infer from the works surveyed above that ecomusicological scholarship treats place relationally. Indeed, Grimley notes that, within musicological literature broadly speaking, “place has frequently been conceived in a manner that is overly reductive, indicating a direct link between a musical work [...] and the specific site or location where that work was first created and performed.”³⁴⁷ More specifically, this relational understanding of place entails two separate, although often overlapping, strains of thought. Music, music-making, or listening to music involves what I will refer to as *place-sensing* or *place-making* (or sometimes both). Since those terms circulate across different academic fields and disciplines, I define them both here myself.

Both place-sensing and place-making have at least two meanings with respect to listening and music. Place-sensing can refer to something active or passive. Echolocation is an example of active place-sensing. Listening to a soundscape involves passive place-sensing.³⁴⁸ Likewise, place-sensing is also passive when a listener’s musical experience refers that listener to a

³⁴⁶ Nonspecific usage of the term place reflects its complexity and breadth of meaning. Malpas points out that “the term may well be thought so commonplace and so much a part of our everyday discourse that its transfer to more theoretical contexts is likely to present an immediate problem.” The term’s plasticity puts it at odds with theoretical delimitation. Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 21.

³⁴⁷ Grimley, *Delius*, 12. Despite this assessment, Grimley concludes that Delius’s music is “unavoidably political: shaped by, and giving sounding form to, the complex sociocultural environments in which it was produced and performed.” Grimley, *Delius*, 28. Malpas rejects the notion that place is inherently political: see Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 35–36 and 215.

³⁴⁸ “[T]he concept of a soundscape linked a sound to its source. A soundscape, by definition, was an audio representation of a real place. Whatever the processing or editing of a recorded sound, to qualify as a soundscape it had to embody the identity of the place that it represented.” Joel Chabade, “Foreword,” in *Environmental Sound Artists in Their Own Words*, eds., Frederick Bianchi and V.J. Manzo (Oxford University Press, 2016), vii. On that note, acoustemology (acoustic epistemology) involves the study of place-sensing. Steven Feld’s *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Duke University Press, 2012) is widely regarded as a landmark in the study of acoustemology.

particular place.³⁴⁹ Place-making is active in two senses: on the one hand, the Berlin Philharmonic probably plays a significant role in shaping the identity of Berlin; on the other hand, a soundscape composition may be appreciated as representing the sonic features of some environment (“actual” or virtual).³⁵⁰ How do these terms actually map onto the scholarship surveyed above?

Von Glahn examines music as representative of place (place-sensing) and the role those representations play in the identity of “actual” places (place-making). This is the central thesis of her book *The Sounds of Place* (2003), in which she argues that a wide range of American composers—from Charles Ives to Steve Reich—have intentionally engaged with natural and built environments in their music. By evoking, representing, and depicting specific places, these works have actively participated in shaping cultural and environmental consciousness. Feisst takes a music-analytical approach to examine music as informed by “actual” place (place-sensing). For Feisst, Adams’s work *In the White Silence* “evokes the idea of music as place

³⁴⁹ Watkins calls this kind of place-sensing ecological. For Watkins, the term ecology “encourages exploration of music’s many modes of being in place [place-making] as well as how music constitutes a virtual environment related in subtle or overt ways to actual environments [place-sensing].” Watkins, “Musical Ecologies,” 405. Watkins cites Robert Schumann’s 1840 review of Schubert’s Symphony in C, in which Schumann suggests that his familiarity with Vienna enhanced his experience of the symphony. Schumann writes: “On hearing Schubert’s symphony and its bright, flowery, romantic life, the city crystallizes before me, and I realize why such works could be born in these surroundings.” Watkins, “Musical Ecologies,” 404. This resembles Adams’s notion of “the music of a place,” which I discuss below in the section titled “Resonance of Place.” From Schumann’s perspective, the listener detects Viennese qualities in the musical work. From an object-oriented perspective, though, those qualities do not belong to Vienna and somehow find their way into the music (via the listener’s experience of it, for example) but *belong to* the music. Grimley notes that, according to the latter view, “some inherent property of the musical work has been significantly shaped by the character or quality of a particular place. Essential aspects of that place can then be read immanently through analysis of the work. This completes a tautological process of induction without capturing the dialectical nature of either the work in question or the notion of place as an ontological category (that is to say, as a site of being or existing in the world).” Grimley, *Delius*, 12. Thus, if a listener detects Viennese qualities in a symphony, it is because Vienna and that symphony share the same or similar *sensual qualities*. Both objects, however, stylize those qualities in their own particular way.

³⁵⁰ Sound studies scholars have recognized that sound and music play a significant role in informing people’s sense of place. Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2012). An ecomusicological example of this type of study is Eric Drott, “The Peasant’s Voice and the Tourist’s Gaze: Listening to Landscape in Luc Ferrari’s *Petite symphonie intuitive pour un paysage de printemps*,” in *Current Directions*, 233–44.

through spatially deployed sound to enhance the perception of background and foreground strata.” Likewise, his sound-light installation *The Place Where You Go to Listen* (2005) “helps listeners to establish a special connection with [Alaska] or restore ‘lost connection [to] a place they inhabit.’”³⁵¹ Grimley searches for “actual” places within Delius’s music (evocations of “actual” places within a listener’s subjective experience) and how the place-sensing involved there, in turn, shapes the identity of those “actual” places (place-making). “The place of Delius’s music,” Grimley writes, “is unavoidably political: shaped by, and giving sounding form to, the complex socio-cultural environments in which it was produced and performed.”³⁵²

Størvold examines (non-representational) music as something that constructs its “actual” place of origin (place-making). Størvold illustrates how contemporary Icelandic music participates in constructing and critiquing narratives of the country’s national identity. Finally, Watkins makes the distinction between “actual” and virtual places explicit: “While music emplaces us through its sheer physical impact on our bodies,” Watkins writes, “it also transports us into alternative realities, into virtual environments of its and our own synergistic making.”³⁵³ “Actual” places exist “out there,” while virtual ones (which enable place-sensing of those “actual” places) are the exclusive domain of human-music relations (place-making).

Mapping the terms onto these studies not only clarifies their goals and reveals their emphasis on a relational understanding of place, but it also reveals an implicit division between “actual” and virtual places, one which Watkins makes explicit when she writes: “By composing music that aspires to ‘be landscape’ rather than represent it, Adams continues the long tradition

³⁵¹ Feisst, “Music as Place,” 33 and 44, respectively.

³⁵² Grimley, *Delius*, 28.

³⁵³ Watkins, “Musical Ecologies,” 408. Before this, Watkins suggests: “Treating music as a virtual environment has the potential to inform ecomusicological studies of how music negotiates the conceptual and material nexus where nature and culture meet.” Watkins, “Musical Ecologies,” 407.

of crafting virtual musical spaces that may or may not profess ties to actual places.”³⁵⁴ This division runs the risk of the taxonomic fallacy. Case in point: pianist David Shimoni, in his contribution to *The Farthest Place*, a volume of essays on Adams’s music, and the most comprehensive source for in-depth, analytical discussions of Adams’s work, writes: “Whereas *songbirdsongs* seems to lead us on an aural expedition to an imagined land, *Inuksuit* [a massive percussion piece that is typically performed outdoors] leads us to explore a real place.”³⁵⁵ Ultimately, though, what all of this work reveals is that what remains absent from ecomusicological scholarship is a metaphysical concern with the place of music, the place(s) that music creates. Watkins’s idea of *virtual environments* is certainly close, but this idea assumes that these places differ *ontologically* from “actual” ones, a view that the object-oriented thinker must reject. From a OOO perspective, if music creates place, the place it creates does not differ from any other place in terms of *how* it exists.³⁵⁶ Therefore, there is no reason to ascribe two different ontological structures to two separate kinds of places. The taxonomic distinction between “actual” and virtual places becomes unnecessary (although the two categories may still be useful in another context).³⁵⁷ An object-oriented understanding of music as place-making, strictly speaking, would mean that all musical works, not only those that lend themselves to certain modes of listening (like ambient music or soundscape compositions), create new (real) places. More importantly, it would allow for consideration of both human and nonhuman relations to music.

³⁵⁴ Watkins, *Musical Vitalities*, 147.

³⁵⁵ David Shimoni, “*songbirdsongs* and *Inuksuit*: Creating an Ecocentric Music,” in *The Farthest Place*, 264.

³⁵⁶ That is, as the fourfold structure Harman outlines in *The Quadruple Object*, 110–35.

³⁵⁷ For instance, within theoretical frameworks derived from Deleuzian and post-Deleuzian philosophy. For example, see Paulo de Assis, “Virtual Works—Actual Things,” in *Virtual Works—Actual Things: Essays in Music Ontology*, ed. Paulo de Assis (Leuven University Press, 2018), 9–18.

A similar conflation of terms and the same relational understanding of place can be found in scholarship on Adams and his music. Descriptions of Adams's music typically point to its efficacy in depicting, representing, or evoking Nature, natural environments, landscape, geography, or some particular place *over there*; in other words, its capacity for place-sensing "actual" places. Thus, there is usually the same implicit distinction between "actual" places and virtual ones. Exploring how the contributors to *The Farthest Place* describe Adams's music will offer a better understanding of these points.

Alex Ross describes his experience with Adams's sound-and-light installation *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, which translates raw scientific data from sites across Alaska into electronic sounds, as primarily place-sensing.³⁵⁸ For Ross, *The Place* is a medium for experiencing the "actual" place Alaska in some indirect, aural fashion.³⁵⁹ Gann, too, concludes that *The Place* involves a similar kind of place-sensing: "One feels like an ant," he writes, "crawling, not across a mere Cezanne, but across the state of Alaska itself."³⁶⁰ David Rothenberg suggests the installation involves place-sensing of a nonspecific but actual place (Nature).³⁶¹

Feisst examines how particular works *suggest* "sonic geography," how they evoke "actual" or virtual places via specific musical features: Adams's composition *Earth and the Great Weather* vividly evokes actual Arctic landscapes through its textual content, taped natural

³⁵⁸ Ross, "Song of the Earth," 13–14.

³⁵⁹ Ross even recounts how, during his visit to the installation, he checked the real-time data stations on his laptop to appreciate how the installation reflects the data it receives. Ross, "Song of the Earth," 13.

My argument about this work at the end of this chapter is similar, but differs in that I claim *The Place* does not merely translate Alaska but creates a new place of its own; this avoids the implication that *The Place* is reducible to its relation to Alaska.

³⁶⁰ Gann, "Time at the End of the World," 68.

³⁶¹ Rothenberg, "Go There to Listen: How Music Based on Nature Might Not Need Natural Sounds," in *The Farthest Place*, 107–15.

sounds, and pitch material, while *In the White Silence* evokes the *idea* of music as place, provided the listener hears a performance or recording that captures the intended effect of the composer's seating directions.³⁶² Todd Tarantino conducts a detailed analysis of Adams's musical language and concludes that its evolution reflects Adams's desire "to create a music that reflects the place it comes from [and] to recreate the very conditions that govern placeness."³⁶³ Accordingly, Adams's music mainly involves place-sensing of the actual place it comes from (an idea Adams rejects when he asserts that his music is not "complete" until a listener has "made it their own") and place-making insofar as it successfully represents or imitates the *conditions* of actual place—conditions attributable to literal musical features. Dave Herr suggests that Adams's earliest twenty-first-century works (which he calls Adams's "lightscape" compositions) primarily involve place-sensing of Alaska. According to Herr, these works evoke "the natural cycles of light that occur in the atmosphere of Alaska."³⁶⁴

There are a few passages in the volume that touch on the sort of analytical commentary I suggest for discussing the place of music in the next section, which mainly involves inferring from the musical work's physical effects on its listener a description of the place(s) it creates. When Glenn Kotche writes that the three drum quartets in *Earth* (three separate movements—2, 6, and 9, respectively) "keep the work grounded in a sense of place," he means that the quartets

³⁶² Feisst, "Music as Place," 30–33.

³⁶³ Todd Tarantino, "The Color Field Music of John Luther Adams," in *The Farthest Place*, 157–79. Tarantino observes that "[t]his trend might cause us to look at Adams as a non-composer—perhaps, more mystically as a 'channeller'"—but only if one considers his works mere translations of actual places or gateways to virtual ones. Tarantino, "Color Field Music," 177.

³⁶⁴ Dave Herr, "Timbral Listening in *Dark Waves*," in *The Farthest Place*, 188–205. Herr concludes: "In the years following the turn of the twenty-first century, the music of John Luther Adams has increasingly become a sonic evocation of light, and in particular the 'lightscapes' of Alaska—the dramatic contrast between lightness and darkness that occurs throughout the latitude of 64°51'N." Herr, "Timbral Listening," 201–203.

act as structural markers (“sonic landmarks”) for the listener.³⁶⁵ The quartets have a physical effect on the listener unlike the other movements in the work. Kotche also suggests that, with the quartets, it is “relatively easy to imagine hearing the sound of thunder, hail and rain, river ice melting and breaking up, and gigantic seismic events.”³⁶⁶ Combining these two observations—the first about structural rhythm and the other about imagery—would allow the analyst to speculate as to what sort of place *Earth* takes its listener. Steven Schick describes what it was like to perform *Strange and Sacred Noise* (1991–97) in a desert near San Diego, and recollects that there were moments when the natural world seemed to be “singing along” with the ensemble as they played.³⁶⁷ Discussing the place of music entails considering aspects of the listener’s environment, especially those that have some kind of significant impact on the musical experience. Scott Deal, reflecting on his experience performing *Qilyaun* (1998), writes: “We all felt strongly, and we also understood. We had gone to the place of ecstatic elemental noise.”³⁶⁸ A description of how that happened could follow, but Deal ends there, leaving the rest to his reader’s imagination.

As highlighted above, the contributors to *The Farthest Place* recognize that Adams’s music is effective at depicting, representing, or evoking place, but keep the topic of music *as* place at a distance. For the most part, scholarship on Adams’s music and its relation to place unwittingly capitulates to the same actual-virtual distinction covered at the beginning of this section. The next section represents a brief ontological inquiry into place through OOO. I make

³⁶⁵ Kotche, “The Thunder That Smokes,” 119.

³⁶⁶ Kotche, “The Thunder That Smokes,” 119.

³⁶⁷ Schick, “Strange Noise, Sacred Places,” 84.

³⁶⁸ Scott Deal, “Qilyaun,” in *The Farthest Place*, 155.

the case that from music emerges a real place like any other, an idea which aligns with Adams's creative vision.³⁶⁹

Not Down in Any Map: In Search of an Object-Oriented Place

Intuitively, there is something irreducible about any given place. For OOO, place must be something more than the sum of its constituent parts and something less than its effects on other things. Tokyo is always something *more* than its divisions, its wards and subprefectures. It is also something *less* than the sum total of its effects on other things. Adams's assertion that "it can take a lifetime to truly know a place," written in the early nineties, during the midpoint of his career in Alaska, must be appreciated as wishful thinking.³⁷⁰ No doubt Adams would not claim to "truly know" Alaska today, despite having spent what may reasonably be called a lifetime there.³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ Morton attempts to reclaim place from certain politically progressive and dogmatic ways of thinking in early twenty-first-century literary criticism in Morton, "John Clare's Dark Ecology." This 2008 essay lends itself to an object-oriented reading, as Morton concludes that place is something interminably withdrawn.

³⁷⁰ Adams, *Winter Music*, 24.

³⁷¹ Such a claim would be false from an object-oriented perspective anyway, since to "truly know" anything would amount to something like ontologically coinciding with the thing "truly known." But even then, since real objects withdraw even from their own real qualities, a gap would remain. Reflecting on the anthropogenic effects in Alaska, Adams poignantly remarks that the Alaska he knew "doesn't exist" for him anymore: "A piece like *In the White Silence* is almost—I didn't realize this at the time—almost an elegy for a place that has disappeared." Alex Ross, "Song of the Earth," in *The Farthest Place*, 21. (Coincidentally, Morton refers to sensual objects or translations as "elegies to the disappearance of objects." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 18.) From an object-oriented point of view, one could interpret Adams's sentiment here a number of ways. For example, Adams's perception of Alaska may have changed because the *real* Alaska, at some point, changed from within, due to alterations to its constituent parts (alterations attributable to the anthropogenic effects Adams references in the context of the quoted statement above). Or Adams himself changed. It may be argued that Adams has become a more concerned environmentalist since the late nineties due to his interest in global topics like the Anthropocene—a concern reflected by his knowledge of the influence of anthropogenic effects in Alaska. Thus, Adams's *perception* of Alaska (the *real* Alaska, which may or may not have really changed in any dramatic fashion), can be said to have transformed. With respect to understanding developments in the life of an object, the object-oriented thinker is primarily interested in the stages of an object that represent steps toward autonomy rather than interconnectivity. Adams's concern with the influence of anthropogenic effects in Alaska probably says more about Adams than Alaska. See Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* (Polity, 2016), 114–26.

No place is accessible, at least not in any direct sense. Like all *real objects*, place is interminably withdrawn from all relations. Harman illustrates why this is so in a passage that is not about place *per se* but about the object-quality tension *space*, which, for OOO, is the site of simultaneous relation and non-relation, for reasons given in the following passage:

Sitting at the moment in Cairo, I am not entirely without relation to the Japanese city of Osaka, since in principle I could travel there on any given day. But this relation can never be total, since I do not currently touch the city, and even when I travel to stand in the exact center of Osaka, I will not exhaust its reality. Whatever sensual profile the city displays to me, even if from close range, this profile will differ from the real Osaka that forever withdraws into the shadows of being.³⁷²

This passage suggests a few things about place. For one thing, place is often taken for granted, as is the case with Cairo for Harman. Secondly, place may be understood as a backdrop for aesthetic encounters (encounters between objects), a container for object-object relations. Harman describes the relation between himself and the place (the *real object*) Osaka, and the reality of this relation exists—from the reader’s perspective, anyway—somewhere on the interior of the place (the *real object*) Cairo. The reader imagines that there, *in* Cairo, Harman contemplates a *sensual version* of Osaka. (Like this one, the passage gives rise to a sensual version of Osaka for the reader, too, whatever place that reader may find themselves.) The real Osaka stands behind all its sensual translations, figuratively speaking.³⁷³ These translations “display” numerous sensual qualities.³⁷⁴ This leads to a third thing the passage above suggests about place. As an object of contemplation (a *sensual object*), place typically brings with it an abundance of highly stylized *sensual qualities* (the only aspect of objects that OOO recognizes as directly accessible).

³⁷² Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 100.

³⁷³ This is the reason Harman labels this particular object-quality tension *space*.

³⁷⁴ I do not read Harman’s use of the word “display” in an ocularcentric sense.

It appears, initially, then, that there are at least three overall qualities of an object-oriented place. First, place is *common*, if not ubiquitous, because it is what contains objects and object-object relations. Which means, secondly, that place functions mainly as a container (although, following OOO's critique of overmining, it cannot be reduced to that function). The third overall quality of place, and the most relevant one here, is that, in a metaphorical sense, place is, to its beholder, a profusion of very particular or highly stylized sensual qualities.³⁷⁵

It is important to emphasize that, according to OOO, *all* objects are contained by some other object.³⁷⁶ Any relation at all generates a new object that contains that relation.³⁷⁷ Object-object relations *qua* objects "take place" on the interior of some containing object. Therefore, all objects are, in some sense, *placed* by the object that contains them. It is an infinite regress both ways.³⁷⁸ "If there is no top object and bottom object," Morton points out, "neither is there a *middle object*. That is, there is no such thing as a space, or time, 'in' which objects float. There is

³⁷⁵ Objects stylize their qualities, see Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 55–58.

³⁷⁶ Regarding the mistaken assumption that *sensual objects* are merely "inside the mind," Harman notes that "the location of sensual objects cannot be inside the mind, since both the mind *and* its sensual objects are located on the interior of a more encompassing object. If I perceive a tree, this sensual object and I do not meet up inside my mind, and for a simple reason: my mind and its object are two equal partners in the intention, and the unifying term must contain both." Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 115–16.

³⁷⁷ See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 115–18. More precisely, "every *connection* is itself an object," since Harman identifies five possible kinds of relations between objects: *containment*, *contiguity*, *sincerity*, *connection*, and *no relation at all*. Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 227–28. The term *containment* describes how a given intention, as a whole, *contains* both a real object and a sensual one, while *sincerity* refers to the interior of that intention. Containment itself does not make a new object but *connections* do. Connections occur whenever two real objects indirectly meet (e.g., through *allure*, or the beholder's execution of a real object which gives rise to the sensual one in which that beholder is sincerely absorbed). Harman writes: "When two objects give rise to a new one through vicarious connection, they create a new unified whole that is not only inexhaustible from the outside, but also filled on the inside with a real object sincerely absorbed with sensual ones. And just as every connection is an object, every object is the result of a connection." Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 232–33.

³⁷⁸ Morton notes: "The existence of an object is irreducibly a matter of coexistence. Objects contain other objects, and are contained 'in' other objects." Morton, *Realist Magic*, 45. Malpas also stresses the importance of *nesting places* or an infinite regress of places and notes that, for Aristotle, "*topos* is always the *topos* of some body (and so there must be both a body that is contained and also a body that contains." Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 24. This idea is inherently ecological. Malpas writes: "In being acquainted with a single place, then, one is also thereby acquainted with a larger network of places." Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 24.

no environment distinct from objects.”³⁷⁹ This is a crucial point. For an object to exist there must already be some other object. The idea of place presented here is not just some virtual environment in which a musical experience takes place, but must be understood as a *real object* in the OOO sense, an object that contains the musical experience, which mainly comprises the musical work plus its beholder.³⁸⁰ The place called Tokyo and the place that harbors a musical experience are no different in kind—both are real objects which share the same overall qualities of place.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I outlined the central tenets of OOO’s theory of art. It will be helpful to briefly reiterate a few of the key points raised in those chapters for the sake of clarifying the topic at hand. Again, contrary to traditional formalist approaches, OOO understands the union of beholder and work as a new, third object.³⁸¹ In the case of music, the autonomous unit of aesthetics is this hybrid object comprised of both the listener and the musical work (as opposed to *just* the musical work). Aesthetic (non-literal) experience occurs as a consequence of what Harman calls *theatrical enactment*, which describes a relation between a work and its beholder.³⁸² Adams, who views himself first and foremost as an artist, remarks in one interview that his work is only “completed in community”; that is, his work “doesn’t come fully to life

³⁷⁹ Morton, “Objects as Temporary Autonomous Zones,” *Continent* 1, no. 3 (2011), 108.

³⁸⁰ Intentions as wholes must be classified as real objects as opposed to sensual ones. It is analysis itself that changes intentions and sincerity into objects: Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 227.

³⁸¹ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 11. Usually, this “third object” describes any intention (RO-SO relation) taken as a whole. In the context of discussions about art, though, it emphasizes the asymmetrical confrontation between a real object and a sensual one that is the *occasion* for *allure*—“a connection between a real object inside the intention and another real object lying outside it.” Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 229. This idea aligns with Malpas’s description of place as something that fundamentally encompasses both subjectivity (a beholder’s experience) and objectivity (the musical work) but remains irreducible to one of those things. As Malpas writes: “The subjective and the objective are tied together within the structure of place.” Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 53.

³⁸² See Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 81–85. The phrase *theatrical enactment* does not refer to a perspective or mode of experience one adopts voluntarily but describes the phenomenology of aesthetic experience according to OOO’s theory of art.

until other people [...] receive it and make it their own.”³⁸³ This sentiment coheres with the OOO idea of theatricality, which suggests that the beholder of a given work plays an indispensable role in the manifestation of that work’s aesthetic power. For Adams, his music (as art) is not “complete” (i.e., *is* art) until a musician, listener, critic, or some beholder “makes it their own”; in other words, until a beholder brings the music to life by enacting or executing some withdrawn reality of the work (e.g., some object it contains, or to which it alludes). For OOO, the human beholder is a necessary ingredient in art. Adams’s notion that his music is not “complete” without the listener reflects this idea.³⁸⁴ Understood as an ontological claim rather than a normative aesthetic one, that notion also lends some clarity to what Adams means by sonic geography, too, since that concept assumes a music-plus-listener hybrid.

The hybrid object, as conceived here, contains the musical experience. This new, autonomous object is *co-produced* by the music and its beholder.³⁸⁵ Following Harman’s more

³⁸³ Regarding Adams’s thoughts about himself as an artist rather than a composer, Adams also states: “As an artist, my primary responsibility is to my art as art.” Adams, “‘I want my art to matter. I want it to be of use.’: John Luther Adams,” *The Guardian*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/oct/30/john-luther-adams-composer-become-ocean>. Adams expresses this same sentiment in an earlier interview: “It’s only through the presence, awareness, and creative engagement of the listener that the music is complete.” Adams, “Making Music in the Anthropocene,” *Slate*, February 24, 2015, <https://slate.com/culture/2015/02/john-luther-adams-grammy-winner-for-become-ocean-discusses-politics-and-his-composition-process.html>. Adams suggests that art “often begins in solitude.” Adams, *Winter Music*, 183. In a certain sense, it can *only* begin in solitude, since it always the beholder *alone* who experiences an object as art.

Adams may have found this idea in Cage. He writes: “After Cage, Western music would never be the same. The center of music is no longer the omniscient composer. It’s the listener. And the composer is now free to be a listener too. The broader implications of this musical worldview are ecological.” Adams, *Winter Music*, 79.

³⁸⁴ “What I may have experienced [...] when I was in that place, working on the music, really doesn’t matter. What matters is the music and how it touches you.” Adams, “John Luther Adams, 2012 April 15,” interview by Libby Van Cleve, *Oral History of American Music: Major Figures in American Music*, Music Library of Yale University, April 16, 2012, audio, https://yalemusiclib.aviaryplatform.com/collections/931/collection_resources/19022/file/79536.

³⁸⁵ Harman writes: “But even an object with a human ingredient is autonomous from all that does not belong to it, including the secondary attempt of the beholder to interpret the very compound object to which they belong.” Harman, *Art and Objects*, 174. It is worth noting here, too, that this hybrid object does not necessarily arise “in time” but is rather a formal consequence of the way in which OOO articulates object-object relations.

recent writing, it may be more accurate to call this object a compound object instead.³⁸⁶ It is this compound object itself that I identify as the place of music, the place(s) that music creates.³⁸⁷ It must be conceded, then, that every listener co-produces with the musical work a new, *real* place that is neither wholly subjective nor reducible to the musical work alone.³⁸⁸ This does not mean, however, that an infinite number of new, real places are possible with respect to any given musical work, since, just as interpretations are not arbitrary and unlimited, no object can be the source of an infinite number of new realities.³⁸⁹ At any given moment, a musical work supports a finite (though indeterminate) range of meaningful encounters. Thus, the compound object is both unique and limited: unique in its emergence with each beholder, and limited by the finitude of the musical work itself.

In the previous section, I drew attention to descriptions of Adams's music in relation to ideas of place. Interpretive statements about the "place" of his music typically amount to descriptions of the musical work as something apart from its beholder. The musical work is a gateway to place-sensing or place-making. This reverts to a kind of formalism that OOO rejects,

³⁸⁶ Harman writes that art "actively couples the beholder to the aesthetic object so as to produce a new compound object." Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 105.

³⁸⁷ Malpas notes that the complexity of place "does not entail a dispersion of elements, but enables their 'gathering together'—their interconnection and unification—in such a way that their multiplicity and differentiation can be both preserved and brought to light." Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 174.

³⁸⁸ The existence of the hybrid object involves a *human* beholder and some work (intended as art). Again, for OOO, art is something that contains a human beholder. It is possible, though, that this hybrid object may contain a nonhuman beholder in place of the human one. The question of whether this still constitutes *art* is beyond the scope of this chapter.

³⁸⁹ See Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology," 159. According to Harman, "every reality supports multiple types of knowledge, but not an infinite number. More concretely, there may be five or six different ways to interpret a medical condition, and a similar half-dozen or so ways to approach a political dilemma, interpret *Hamlet*, or follow Immanuel Kant with a new philosophy of one's own." Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 189. For OOO, the more a work *is art* (put very simply, the more an object resists its sensual qualities), "the more it presents an ongoing challenge to any interpretation and the more it impels us to further encounters." Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer* (Repeater Books, 2016), 181. Therefore, it may be said that the more a musical work *is art*, the larger its capacity for generating new and distinct, real places. The analyst or interpreter's work therefore describes a possible future attunement to (or coexistence with) a musical work.

which involves paraphrasing or literalizing the content of the work with no reference to the beholder's participation in it—descriptions of musical experience under the guise of descriptions about the musical work.

Analysis, interpretation, or description of the place(s) of music may involve references to the listener's musical experience, too, but the focus shifts away from *impressions or descriptions of the musical work from a distanced observer* to *impressions or descriptions of the listener's physical experience with (attunement to) the musical work*, their coexistence with it, which can involve greater or lesser degrees of intimacy.³⁹⁰ These descriptions must be understood to allude to how the listener and that work were (em)placed by the object that contained them.³⁹¹ This kind of analytical or interpretive work must be regarded as highly subjective (contingent on each listener), or phenomenological.³⁹² From an analytical or interpretive perspective, the object in question, the place of music, remains radically indeterminate.³⁹³ This is another overall quality of place that must be added to the list. Although, as just pointed out above, such work cannot be unlimited in its scope. The value of OOO analytical or interpretive work, with respect to the place of music, rests on its capacity to reveal the potential of a work; that is, what sort of place(s) a work may take its listener.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁰ Morton, "Attune," in *Veer Ecology: A Companion of Environmental Thinking*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 151–167. Attunement is "a living, dynamic relation with another being"; it is "the feeling of an object's power" over one's self. Morton, "Attune," 151 and 162.

³⁹¹ The musical experience *post hoc* may be regarded as a translation of the place that it and its listener co-produced.

³⁹² For examples of phenomenological musical analysis, see Thomas Clifton, *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology* (Yale University Press, 1983), David Bard-Schwarz and Richard Cohn, eds., *David Lewin's Morgengruß: Text, Context, Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2015), and Judy Lochhead, *Reconceiving Structure in Contemporary Music: New Tools in Music Theory and Analysis* (Routledge, 2020).

³⁹³ Morton, "John Clare and the Question of Place," 108.

³⁹⁴ After all, an object-oriented analysis ultimately seeks fidelity to the object at hand, "with the goal of drawing out its weirdness and individuality," as Taxier puts it. Taxier, "Object-Oriented Musicology," 179.

According to what I have just outlined, art creates new objects that are *real* places—*new realities*.³⁹⁵ There is one final overall quality to mention here with respect to place. Since place *contains* it must also be said to *exclude*. Place *contains* objects and *excludes* objects. Not everything in the cosmos relates to a particular object-object relation. With the dissolution of the compound object, the beholder can no longer be said to belong to the place of music. And since, in any musical experience, the beholder is sincerely absorbed in the musical work and not the object that contains their experience of it, the place of music becomes an object of aesthetic or contemplative interest for the beholder *after* the musical experience (which means the physicality of music extends to one's impressions or memories of the musical experience). Descriptions of place are necessarily indirect, metaphorical, never sufficient, and risk falling into naivete, as they fail to fully account for its reality that withdraws. This aligns with Morton's object-oriented assertion that the "meaning" of any artwork is (in the) future, or "the significance of any set of relations is in the future."³⁹⁶ Since these new, real places are so indeterminate, so obscure, what can one actually say about them? Again, descriptions of the place of music will consist of reflections on how that place shaped the work and its beholder; these descriptions will draw attention to the physicality of coexistence with the music.³⁹⁷

In Chapter 1, I pointed out that one of the problems OOO finds with formalism is its exclusion of the world outside the artwork from the beholder's experience of that work.³⁹⁸ Re-

³⁹⁵ How place, and the place of music specifically, affects what it contains or has contained is a topic that falls outside the scope of this chapter. On this topic, see Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Ohio University Press, 2012), and Malpas, *Place and Experience*.

³⁹⁶ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 90. For Morton and other object-oriented thinkers, the future belongs to the withdrawn essence of an object (a reversal of Heidegger's understanding of essence as the past, or what is given).

³⁹⁷ The terms place-sensing and place-making, defined in the previous section, remain relevant to the idea of place that I present here, although the implied distinction between "actual" and virtual places vanishes.

³⁹⁸ See Harman, "Three Problems of Formalism," 202–203.

theorizing the compound object as place enables one to examine outdoor performances of Adams's works in a new light.³⁹⁹ Works can incorporate qualities of the environment in which they are performed with the place of music.⁴⁰⁰ *Inuksuit*, for example, Adams's first work conceived specifically for outside performance, asks its performers to be dispersed and move throughout a large, open area. Adams encourages listeners to do the same: "The listeners, too, may move around freely and discover their own individual listening points."⁴⁰¹ *Inuksuit* draws attention to the fact that the environment in which one listens to music inevitably inflects that musical experience. The quiet of the concert hall characterizes the place of music as much as the traffic outside. Like a jeweler's loupe, the compound object as place enables inspecting the work as it diffracts its surroundings. It enables countermethods, like imagining the work performed in different settings. It turns the musical work into a medium for the contemplation of place.

Or take *songbirdsongs*, a work not originally intended to be played outside, as another example. An outdoor performance of the work may incorporate the sounds of tree leaves rustling in the wind as well as the songs of real birds.⁴⁰² The listener's attunement to the musical work changes as a result. A listener may reflect on how the birdsong represented in the musical work by the woodwind instruments was indistinguishable from the birdsong in the surrounding environment. The place of music may therefore be described as troubling, ambiguous, or uncanny, as the listener struggled to identify real birdsong from imitation birdsong.

³⁹⁹ Works like *Inuksuit* (2009), *Sila: The Breath of the World* (2013), *Across the Distance* (2015), and *In the Name of the Earth* (2017)—all of which are specifically conceived for outdoor performance.

⁴⁰⁰ For the object-oriented thinker, the question inevitably must be *which* qualities.

⁴⁰¹ Adams, "Programme Note for *Inuksuit*," Wise Music Classical, accessed January 19, 2026. <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/57056/Inuksuit--John-Luther-Adams/>.

⁴⁰² Like the 2018 outdoor performance of the work at the Tippet Rise Art Center, a 12,000-acre arts venue in Montana established in 2016 which regularly hosts concerts. Tippet Rise Art Center, "John Luther Adams-songbirdsongs, movement V. Mourning Dove," August 3, 2019, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/Rp5CoE2ym-A>.

Shimoni writes that *songbirdsongs* “cultivates an appreciation for the creativity and spontaneity of the performers and the birds alike. The work’s indeterminate structure allows us to feel that the birds and the performers have agency within its creation, and this feature, as much or more than its authenticity of pitches, rhythms, and timbres, makes the work both ecocentric and musically alive.”⁴⁰³ This particular description makes no attempt to paraphrase the musical work (and then to imply that that paraphrase is equal to a “place” the music creates). It may be read as a description that alludes to what I have called the place of music by describing a beholder’s attunement to *songbirdsongs*. The listener “feels” that the (musically represented) birds and the performers have agency *somewhere*. One can infer from this that the work creates a place where birds and humans coexist in ambiguous fashion, where the difference between human and nonhuman sound is erased.

Counterfactual speculation may involve imagining *songbirdsongs* performed in different environments. How might *songbirdsongs* ask its listener to coexist with it in an air-conditioned building some late summer afternoon? The place that a work creates for its listener must invariably depend on the environment in which that work is heard.⁴⁰⁴ This is why adopting OOO’s theory of art and formalist approach to art supports understanding Adams’s music as place(-making). From an object-oriented perspective, Adams’s music is a source of new, *real* places. His music (like all music) asks its listener to attune to the world around them—not as

⁴⁰³ David Shimoni, “*songbirdsongs* and *Inuksuit*,” in *The Farthest Place*, 252.

⁴⁰⁴ Not every feature of that environment will be included in the compound object, however. The listener may speculate as to which aspects are more likely to affect the musical experience than others, or, in interpretive analysis, for instance, work out which aspects of the environment actually made an impact on their musical experience. In *Art and Objects*, Harman emphasizes that OOO is committed to the independence of artworks and of all other objects: “not because nothing is ever affected by anything else, but because nothing is affected by *everything* else. [...] How relations occur is a key philosophical problem, and not something that should be taken as a *fait accompli* simply because we know from experience that there are causal influences in the world. After all, we know equally well from experience that many things do not affect each other. The only way to do justice to both points is to recognize that relations are something to be explained rather than assumed.” Harman, *Art and Objects*, 138.

something outside or inside the musical work, but as something that inevitably participates in the listener's coexistence with that work.⁴⁰⁵

In summary, then: Place is a real object. It is not something that merely gives rise to experience. Neither is it simply an experiential construct, something purely correlated to human experience.⁴⁰⁶ It is ubiquitous; it contains; it excludes; it heavily stylizes its components; it is radically indeterminate, and it is futural. Places mainly differ in terms of their individual sensual qualities. For other scholars, a musical experience is a gateway to place-sensing or place-making of an "actual" or virtual place. Following the object-oriented place just proposed, though, reflections on the musical experience (call it place) provides the gateway for place-sensing of a place already made. Place must be something that the listener reflects on *after* the musical experience. Musical works create places—they emit what Morton calls a zone: "A zone is not studiously decided on by committee before it goes into action. Irreducibly, *it is already happening*."⁴⁰⁷ Listeners find themselves inside these zones, these places, all of a sudden, and then reflecting belatedly on how to relate to them. Place is the unacknowledged background of any given musical experience.

⁴⁰⁵ The listener-music relation takes place on the interior of a new real object. This new object does not exist in a void but rather in a containing object, a *place*. It is this containing object that allows OOO's brand of formalism to say that the world outside an artwork may be included in a beholder's experience of that work, since that containing body contains the listener-music relation *and* whatever else happens to be contiguous with it. Thus, listening to the first movement of Beethoven's "Tempest" Sonata during a particularly severe thunderstorm may result in an unusually dramatic experience of its musical outbursts, or listening to Adams's orchestral work *Become Ocean* with headphones on the beach at night alone may result in the sounds of the waves and sweeping orchestral gestures of the work eliding with one another in such a way that the oceanic qualities of the work are amplified by that environment.

⁴⁰⁶ Malpas suggests that place is "not founded *on* subjectivity, but is rather that *on which* subjectivity is founded." Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 34.

⁴⁰⁷ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 142–43.

The Deepest, Most Inexhaustible Source

In a 2000 interview, Adams recalls the momentous experience of listening to Morton Feldman's *Piece for Four Pianos* for the first time: "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. [...] It was right then I decided I had to be a composer."⁴⁰⁸ A more detailed version of his experience appears in an early unpublished version of his memoir, where he underscores the transformative effect that the work had on him. The passage explicitly connects his experience to thoughts about music and place:

I put the record on. The first cut was *Piece for Four Pianos* from 1957. Within a couple of minutes I was transported to another world. When the music ended, I picked up the needle and played it again. Who knows how many times I repeated this. I couldn't figure out what it was about this music that made me feel this way—an almost painful longing for something that hadn't yet happened, for a place that didn't yet exist. And I wanted to be in that place for as long as I could. It was right about then that I knew what I wanted to do with my life.⁴⁰⁹

The passage above resembles a passage in the final, published version of Adams's memoir in which he describes his experience of arriving in Alaska for the first time in the

⁴⁰⁸ "Interview with John Luther Adams," John Luther Adams website, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://johnlutheradams.net/interviews/3>.

⁴⁰⁹ This passage was cut from the final version of the memoir. Shimoni, "Ecological Aspects of the Music of John Luther Adams," (PhD diss., City University of New York Graduate Center, 2015), 4. The only mention of the record is at the end of the book, in a section where Adams surveys and reminisces about his belongings in his Alaskan cabin: "Here are the symphonies of Sibelius and Bruckner, which I've come to in recent years. And here is *Morton Feldman: The Early Years*, the record that convinced me in my teens that this was what I wanted to do with my life." Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 169.

Adams states in one interview: "One of the defining epiphanies of my life came when I acquired a Columbia Masterworks LP titled 'Morton Feldman: The Early Years.' All I really knew about Feldman was that he was a pal of John Cage's. But when I heard the *Piece for Four Pianos*, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. This music took me to a place that Pink Floyd just couldn't go. It was right then I decided I had to be a composer." "Interview with John Luther Adams."

Adams composed his orchestral work *The Far Country of Sleep* in memory of Feldman. According to Adams, Feldman's music is "haunted by the ideal of the sublime landscape," a metaphor he would later use to refer to his own work. Adams, *Winter Music*, 11. Adams also refers to Feldman's music as intensely sensuous, a quality he hopes his own music shares. He cites Tenney and Feldman as the two most influential composers in his life. He remarks that Feldman's music serves as a consistent influence in his creative work: "In my own music I try to combine rigorous formalism with an equally intense sensuality (the legacy of Feldman), and an integration of pitch and rhythm (the theoretical legacy of Cowell)." Adams, *Winter Music*, 121.

summer of 1975. His description suggests that that experience turned out to be similarly inspiring:

As the plane touched down in Juneau, I caught my first glimpse of the Mendenhall Glacier, tumbling off the ice field. Within an hour we were hiking up its west ridge. The spruce-scented air was intoxicating, and I was astonished by the deep cobalt blue of the ice. As we climbed amid boulders, rubble, and orange columbine, my ear caught a faint tinkling—like glass wind chimes in a gentle breeze. Looking down, I realized it was meltwater, resonating from deep within a crevasse. Such a delicate sound for such an immensity of ice! In that moment, I knew that something fundamental had changed.⁴¹⁰

Adams's fascination with music and place is evident in both passages. In the first, he describes the experience of emplacement, of *being placed* by a musical work. In the second, he alludes to the idea that place itself can be attuned to (listened to), albeit indirectly, through objects contained by that place. Those two paths of thought—music's ability to place, and place's capacity to be musical—intersect in Adams's 1994 essay "Resonance of Place," where he articulates both: the first as "sonic geography" and the second as "the music of a place." Adams implicitly refers to these two ideas in his later writings, publications, and interviews, whenever he talks about music and place. Both ideas have guided Adams's musical thinking for decades, and both have taken up new subtleties over time in relation to their original articulation in that essay.

"Resonance of Place"

Adams's thoughts about music and place find their first and most detailed expression in his 1994 essay "Resonance of Place." The two most important ideas in the essay are "the music of a place" and "sonic geography." Both ideas constitute the foundation for Adams's later thoughts

⁴¹⁰ Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 18.

about music and place. Examining both helps to set the stage for a closer analysis of his engagement with that topic.

In “Resonance of Place,” Adams provides an overview of the ideas that had guided his development as a composer up until that point: from birdsong (*songbirdsongs*) to landscape (*Night Peace* and *The Far Country of Sleep*) and then to place (*Earth and the Great Weather*), although the latter frames all of the topics, as the title suggests. The essay is part autobiography, part publicity, and part a serious incentive to listeners and other composers to (re)think the connections listening and music make with places. Adams’s notion of “the music of a place” plays a pivotal role in understanding what he means by “sonic geography,” so it is important to examine that idea first. The essay begins on a philosophical note:

The places we live in resonate within us. The sounds around us—the songs of birds, the cries of animals, the rhythms of the seasons and the reverberations of the elements—all echo in the music of a place.⁴¹¹

What does this mean? Adams does not refer to the total collection of sounds contained in a given soundscape. The phrase “the music of a place” instead refers to the music that emerges from a composer as a consequence of that composer consciously or unconsciously absorbing the features, aspects, or *qualities* of a place. Since one of the overall qualities of place as it is proposed here is that it heavily stylizes the things within it, certain characteristics or qualities of Alaska may be derived from the things that place contains, like the songs of birds, the cries of animals, and the rhythms of the seasons. Those qualities “resonate within us,” and then, as a matter of course (from Adams’s perspective), make their way into a composer’s music. Thus place, by proxy or *vicariously*, makes its way obliquely into a composer’s music.⁴¹²

⁴¹¹ Adams, *Winter Music*, 7. This seems to suggest that it matters what music we listen to, too.

⁴¹² Discussing *vicarious causation* here would take things too far afield. Instead, see Cogburn, “Editors’ Introduction,” xxii–xxv.

Music therefore indirectly “points to” the place of its origin. Place *echoes* in music. Kyle Gann reflects on the beginning of Adams’s essay in his foreword to *Winter Music* and poses perhaps the most philosophical question of all in relation to Adams’s claims: *How* do places echo in a composer’s music?⁴¹³ The question has to do with causality, with how one object changes another. Much like OOO, Adams solves the problem with the idea of translation or aesthetic mediation.

On the surface, Adams’s notion of “the music of a place” involves an understanding of place as something that music evokes, not music properly understood as place; that is, place-making in the stronger sense fleshed out earlier in this chapter. Yet there are two significant aspects in Adams’s thinking here that separate it from that sense, namely: the notion that place is indeterminate and therefore not *directly* accessible, and the notion that place may be approached *indirectly* via its *qualities*, its parts, or by means of some kind of translation. These aspects situate Adams’s creative thinking comfortably within OOO. At least, those two aspects combined map onto OOO’s understanding of the object-quality tension called *allure*, which OOO holds responsible for all aesthetic experience or any change at all. The above understanding of “the music of a place” clarifies Adams’s beliefs in the second paragraph of his essay:

The rich diversity of music around the world is a result of people living for centuries in harmony with their own physical and cultural geographies. Today, even in urban areas where musicians have little or no intimate experience of the natural world, there are still qualities of music unique to specific places. In large measure these qualities arise from the vitality and persistence of ethnic traditions.

⁴¹³ “Normally one dismisses such questions without thinking about them,” Gann writes, “but once Adams has brought them up, they have an irritating habit of sticking.” Gann, “Foreword,” xi.

Adams holds place itself responsible for the diversity of musical traditions.⁴¹⁴ Thus, the process of discovering and building place(s) via music can be both accidental and a conscious effort. Either way, it involves what OOO recognizes as vicarious causation, a key component of which is the sensual version or translation of a real object.⁴¹⁵ This, again, suggests a belief that causation is accidental (aesthetic). The term “qualities” in reference to “specific places” stands out; so too does the fact that Adams attributes *unique* qualities to specific places. Reading the beginning of the essay like this suggests that Adams thinks of place as something *real* in the OOO sense—inaccessible, characterized primarily by unique (*real*) qualities, but nevertheless accessible by indirect means.⁴¹⁶

Adams refers to the qualities of place as resonances: “Through sustained listening to the unique resonances of this place [Alaska] I’ve aspired to make music that belongs here, somewhat like the plants and the birds—music informed by worldwide traditions but music that can best, perhaps *only* be made here.”⁴¹⁷ To discover “the music of a place,” one must listen carefully to or for the qualities of that place. Adams suggests that one may “discover a new kind of music” in one’s contemplation of those qualities: “music that somehow resonates” with that place. This is

⁴¹⁴ Adams, *Winter Music*, 7. This passage can also be read as a critique of globalism. Indeed, later in the essay, Adams expresses his opinion on this matter quite firmly: “With the noblest intentions the superficial qualities of ancient traditions are casually appropriated and popularized.” Adams, *Winter Music*, 17.

⁴¹⁵ Refer to Cogburn, “Editors’ Introduction,” xxii–xxv.

⁴¹⁶ Adams, *Winter Music*, 7. Regarding the final sentence in that passage: Adams places a great deal of value here on ethnic traditions, obviously favoring them over more modern ones. While the influence of cultural knowledge and traditions from Alaskan Native peoples (the Yup’ik, Iñupiat, Unangan (Aleut), Athabaskan, Tlingit, Haida, and other Native peoples) presents an interesting and rich opportunity for (ethno)musicologists to examine the influence of those relationships on his work, those questions are beyond scope of this chapter. Adams has addressed these relationships himself: for examples, see Adams, *Winter Music*, 118; Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 101–102. For relevant scholarship see: Dianne Chisholm, “Shaping an Ear for Climate Change: The Silarjuapomorphizing Music of Alaskan Composer John Luther Adams,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 2 (2016), 172–95; Kinnear, “Voicing Nature in John Luther Adams’s The Place Where You Go to Listen,” *Organised Sound* 17, no. 3 (2012), 230–39; Bernd Herzogenrath, “Introduction,” in *The Farthest Place*, 1–12.

⁴¹⁷ Adams, *Winter Music*, 8.

music that takes on the qualities of a place through its composer's role as a conduit or mediator. This role may be either conscious and deliberate, or unconscious and involuntary. Either way, Adams believes the composer must have either attuned themselves to the place through careful, attentive listening, or spent long enough within that place for its qualities to have assimilated into that composer's life, into that composer's being. This is why Adams asserts that the places we live in "resonate within us."

From an object-oriented perspective, Adams's essay is a meditation on indirect access to place, a reflection on the ways he has found in his work to adapt those qualities to sensual translations of place. (An alternative, object-oriented title for Adams's essay would simply be "Qualities of Place.") Adams spends the rest of the essay reflecting on three questions: "[H]ow did the sounds and rhythms of the earth influence the birth and growth of those [musical] traditions? How does where we live influence the music we make? And how might closer listening to the music of place contribute to a renewal of human music and cultures?"⁴¹⁸ He finds answers to each of these questions in various forms of translation, the most important of which he calls "sonic geography."

Adams defines sonic geography as "a region that lies somewhere between place and culture, between human imagination and the world around us."⁴¹⁹ This definition assumes an ontological gap or division between human and world. Another way to understand sonic geography is as a *sensual* medium for a *real* place. As a created work, sonic geography serves as a gateway to place for its listener. Culture moves through sonic geography to place. Sonic

⁴¹⁸ Adams, *Winter Music*, 7.

⁴¹⁹ Adams, *Winter Music*, 36.

geography enables place to be perceived indirectly; it is Adams's attempt to avoid the reduction of place to literal musical paraphrase. Sonic geography is place *de-literalized*.

In the following sections I aim to present a more complete understanding of music as place according to Adams by examining the two concepts that directed Adams to the two main ideas he explores in "Resonance of Place" (the "music of a place" and "sonic geography"): translation and landscape. Adams's interest in translation and landscape precedes his discovery or initial formulation of sonic geography. As already indicated, those two things are closely connected to that concept. Then, I examine how all of those ideas inform his creative interaction with the most influential place to his life and music: Alaska.

Translation

Translation is what connects Adams's early works to his later ones. In his memoir, Adams recalls his first visit to Alaska: "I imagined there was music that could be heard only there, music that belonged there like the plants and the birds, music that resonated with all that space and silence, cold and stone, wind and fire and ice."⁴²⁰ Adams sought to capture it musically with *Earth and the Great Weather*. With its incorporation of field recordings and Alaskan Native languages, the work is "a journal through the physical, cultural, and spiritual landscapes of the arctic."⁴²¹ Shimoni calls it a "sonic portrait" of Alaska.⁴²² The work translates various parts of Alaska so that its beholder may attain some kind of indirect access to its withdrawn reality. But translation was on Adams's mind before his arrival in Alaska.

⁴²⁰ Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 18.

⁴²¹ Adams, "Sonic Geography of the Arctic," <https://www.johnlutheradams.net/interviews/2>.

⁴²² Shimoni, "Ecological Aspects of the Music of John Luther Adams," 63.

In his sketches for *songbirdsongs*, Adams wrote: “Remember: Translation is the thing. Forget transcription.”⁴²³ What Alaska confirmed for Adams was that one may find the character of a place by listening to the sounds of things that belong to or dwell within it—that objects stylize their constituent objects in their own particular way (place stylizes the things within it).⁴²⁴ Alaska stylizes its birdsong. Birdsong in Alaska is *Alaskan birdsong* as opposed to *Georgian birdsong*, even if the birdsong is the same, or its origin is the same species.⁴²⁵ In his memoir, Adams recalls hearing the singing of a hermit thrush. The passage reflects Adams’s appreciation that place stylizes what it contains: “I knew this song from my travels in the cloud forest of

⁴²³ Adams, sketches for *songbirdsongs*, 1974–1979, Box 2/Folder 1, Adams archive, Fairbanks, Alaska. Quoted in Shimoni, “Ecological Aspects of the Music of John Luther Adams,” 72.

Adams’s disclaimer in the preface to the score of *songbirdsongs* states: “This music is not literal transcription. It is translation. Not imitation, but evocation. My concern is not with precise details of pitch and meter, for too much precision can deafen us to such things as birds and music. I listen for other, less tangible nuances. These melodies and rhythms, then, are not so much constructed artifacts as they are spontaneous affirmations [...] No one has yet explained why the free songs of birds are so simply beautiful. [...] Beyond the realm of ideas and emotions, language and sense, we just may hear something of their essence.” Quote in Shimoni, “Ecological Aspects of the Music of John Luther Adams,” 238.

Regarding his approach to birdsong in his work, Adams stated: “Even when I was just beginning with the bird songs—unlike Messiaen, who prided himself on the accuracy and, as he put it, the authenticity of his bird settings—that was never my objective. [...] I’m not trying to reproduce anything that I hear or experience in the world. I’m more interested in the resonances that a bird song or a peal of thunder or the dance of the aurora borealis or the noise of the traffic on Central Park West might evoke in me. [...] I can use the word authenticity, but in a different sense perhaps than Messiaen. For me, it’s about authentic personal experience, about the primary experience of being there and paying attention.” Sheridan, “John Luther Adams: The Music of a True Place.”

⁴²⁴ Harman writes: “A style is actually *not* a mere concept abstracted from numerous singular cases, but an actual reality that none of its manifestations can exhaust.” Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 55.

The notion that place, and objects in general, stylize their constituent parts in very particular ways is what helps make sense of Adams’s more recent interest in outdoor works—works which call upon their beholders to contemplate the work’s autonomy, its life apart from their experience of it. Following the ideas discussed thus far, Adams’s outdoor works, more than his works composed for concert halls or recordings, reveal his interest in how objects relate independent of their observers—the reciprocal influence of place and music and the inaccessible reality of both.

⁴²⁵ It does not matter how one refers to it, since language does not structure reality.

Southeast Alaska, [but] here in these younger, leaner woods, the phrases were longer and more florid, and the tones were bright—like the light flickering through the newly opened leaves.”⁴²⁶

If place creates its own kind of music, then music can create its own place, too. This is Adams’s logical conclusion, following two philosophical convictions: that reality withdraws from direct access (a philosophical viewpoint which maintains the autonomy of objects) and is thus only available through translation (indirect access), and an ecological worldview in which objects (like places), despite their infinite differences, exist in the same way (flat ontology). Sonic geography is the conduit for creating and contemplating the character of a place. In any case, what is important is that Adams recognizes that anything within a given place can serve as a medium through which one can perceive that place—a notion that is decidedly object-oriented, since it asserts indirect access to things-themselves through aesthetic mediation (like the aesthetic experiences afforded by art). Following Adams’s discovery, he took to experimenting. Instead of listening to those things that already dwell in a place, what if one introduces some new sounding object within it? How does that place sound through that new object, what qualities of that place does that object bring forth?

For three years, Adams carried around a small Aeolian harp through the tundra, forests, mountains, and glaciers of Alaska, listening to the sounds, to the music, that these things created.⁴²⁷ In a 2022 interview, Adams stated: “Much of my life’s work has been shaped by my

⁴²⁶ Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 34.

⁴²⁷ Adams, “John Luther Adams Interview,” The Wind, posted January 4, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcUaEuN4B9Y>. Adams describes the experience of listening to his Aeolian harp: “You put a harp on your head and stand into the wind, and the pink noise—you might say the white light—of the world crosses the strings and it’s almost like a prism. The wind goes across the strings and it breaks into all these beautiful harmonic colors—this aural prism of sound.”

experiences listening to Aeolian harps.”⁴²⁸ For Adams, the instrument was a way to gain indirect access the place around him, to hear Alaska, and the earth itself—a translation machine.⁴²⁹

Adams’s interest in the instrument and the music that it produces predates his idea of sonic geography, and may therefore be understood as a key contributing factor in the development of that idea.

Adams refers to the Aeolian harp as “magical,” since it “allows us to pull the music directly out of the air.”⁴³⁰ The instrument opens up the harmonic series: “The music comes down out of the sky, across the strings of the instrument, into our ears, down through our bodies, and into the earth.”⁴³¹ The process Adams describes above is purely an aesthetic one instead of a strictly “physical” (mechanical) one. This is consistent with the central idea behind the previous chapter, that for OOO causality belongs to the aesthetic dimension. The harp translates those qualities of the wind that it is capable of perceiving. To adopt Morton’s own tactic for

⁴²⁸ Adams, “John Luther Adams Interview.” Adams mentions making recordings with a small Aeolian harp in a journal entry from 1999: “June 26 [...] Dennis and I stay behind to make recordings of the small Aeolian harp I’ve brought with me.” Adams, *Winter Music*, 97.

Since the early nineties, Adams has continued to draw inspiration from the Aeolian harp for his music. Regarding his first two string quartets, he remarks: “I composed my first piece for string quartet, *The Wind in High Places* (2011), when I was fifty-eight. As I wrote it, I imagined the quartet as a single sixteen-string Aeolian harp, with the music’s rising and falling lines and gusting arpeggios coming entirely from natural harmonics and open strings. My second string quartet, *untouched* [2015], was a further exploration of this sound world, with the fingers of the musicians still not touching their fingerboards.” Adams, “Lines Made by Walking,” John Luther Adams, accessed December 31, 2026, <https://www.johnlutheradams.net/recordings/19>.

⁴²⁹ The three years during which Adams carried around the harp were probably in the late eighties. Adams mentions the Aeolian harp contributed to the public radio work that was commissioned in 1989, which indicates that Adams was likely experimenting with the instrument before this.

Adams also mentions that music from the Aeolian harp accompanied his wedding ceremony that same year: “I had brought with me a small Aeolian harp that I tuned to a special mode for the occasion. The harp would be our organ and the wind would be the organist.” Adams, *Winter Music*, 102.

⁴³⁰ Adams, “John Luther Adams Interview.”

⁴³¹ Adams, “John Luther Adams Interview.” Adams refers to the harmonic series as “the breath of the world”—a phrase which suggests the Inuit idea of *sila*: <https://www.climatewords.org/words/sila>.

articulating how objects translate other objects in their own particular way: the harp *harpifies* the wind, our ears *anthropomorphize* that sound, and then, from Adams's perspective, our body then transfers that energy into the earth beneath it.⁴³² Unlike a microphone, which requires some other piece of equipment to output whatever it detects or records, the Aeolian harp provides its listener with *live feedback*—an indirect but nevertheless intimate way of accessing the music of a place.⁴³³

For OOO, any relation will be a translation or distortion of its terms. When asked about his “translation process,” Adams replied: “It’s inevitable. There’s a translation process involved even in this filming and sound recording. [...] There’s no way you can accurately, or even authentically, reproduce the world. And that’s not interesting to me. [...] Ultimately, everything we human animals do, everything we think, everything we speak, everything we *are*, derives from the world in which we live. It’s unavoidable. It’s the way of the world.”⁴³⁴

Landscape

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Adams does not use the terms landscape and place synonymously. His understanding of the former further substantiates his object-oriented conception of place as irreducible, while also showing that the distinction between the two terms is crucial to understanding his philosophy of music. Adams notes, for instance, that before place,

⁴³² Coincidentally, it is the Aeolian harp that Morton uses as an example for contemplating a kind of sentience that encompasses both human and nonhuman things. Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 205–206.

⁴³³ This interpretation excuses his use of the term “direct” in the quote above, which outside the terminology of the theoretical framework adopted here is not significant.

⁴³⁴ Adams, “John Luther Adams 2011 February 18,” interview by Libby Van Cleve, *Oral History of American Music: Major Figures in American Music*, Music Library of Yale University, February 18, 2011, audio, https://yalemusiclib.aviaryplatform.com/collections/931/collection_resources/31392. This statement is misquoted or edited in the transcription of the interview published by NewMusicBox: <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/john-luther-adams-the-music-of-a-true-place/>.

landscape was the primary metaphor for his music. For *Night Peace* (1976) and *The Far Country of Sleep* (1988), wilderness landscapes served as his chief inspiration.⁴³⁵ The terms landscape and place point to fundamentally different objects and therefore different experiences. How are these things different for Adams? Landscapes can be “provoking and inspiring,” Adams writes, but “all too often they’re sadly superficial.”⁴³⁶ One of Adams’s musical landscapes is a highly stylized version of a particular place, a vehicle for getting its listener there. As landscape, the musical work is an instrument that, like the Aeolian harp, offers an alternative, closer (“more direct”) experience of the thing that it mediates. In “Resonance of Place,” Adams finds that this descriptive step is unnecessary and that the work itself may be construed as the medium for place.

Adams began composing *Dream In White On White*, a work for string quartet, harp, and string ensemble, with the idea of musically painting a tundra landscape.⁴³⁷ Sometime during the composition of that work, he realized that landscape was an inadequate metaphor for his musical vision. He wrote that there is a sense in which “the notion of landscape limits our understanding and experience of place.”⁴³⁸ Landscape is place viewed from a distance, a superficial experience of place that “is no substitute for the authentic personal experience of fully *being* in a place.”⁴³⁹ From an object-oriented standpoint, place “becomes” landscape to its beholder when place is

⁴³⁵ Adams, *Winter Music*, 11. Adams writes: “Beginning with *Dream In White On White* (1992) my music became less pictorial as I aspired to evoke the experience, the *feeling* of being in a place, without direct reference to a particular landscape.” Adams, “In Search of an Ecology of Music,” 2006, <https://www.johnlutheradams.net/writings/by/7>.

⁴³⁶ Adams, *Winter Music*, 23.

⁴³⁷ Adams, *Winter Music*, 11.

⁴³⁸ Adams, *Winter Music*, 23.

⁴³⁹ Adams, *Winter Music*, 23.

experienced as nothing more than a literal (banal) object, one “with little to separate it from a bundle of qualities.”⁴⁴⁰ By analogy, referring to one of Adams’s works as *mainly* representative or evocative of landscape is to suggest that that work is reducible to something like a summary or description of its qualities. What Adams sought during the compositional process of *Dream In White On White*, then, by shifting his attention from landscape, was the withdrawn reality or *essence* of the thing “behind” landscape. It is here in Adams’s compositional career that it occurs to him that his music, if it is to convey its own inherently *musical* sense of place, must somehow de-literalize place.⁴⁴¹

In his program note for *In the White Silence* (1998), Adams writes that he wants to “go beyond landscape painting with tones [...] to leave the composition, the ‘piece’ of music, for the *wholeness* of music.”⁴⁴² What does it mean to *leave* the composition? What is the “wholeness of music” and how can this be understood as something or somewhere beyond or outside of the composition? Adams’s next thought in the note expresses his hope more explicitly: “I no longer want to be outside the music, listening to it as an object apart. I want to *inhabit* the music.”⁴⁴³ Adams articulates similar wishes after the completion of *In the White Silence*, when he asks himself in a journal entry dated January 28, 2000: “Can we find other ways of listening in which

⁴⁴⁰ Taxier, “Object-Oriented Musicology,” 38. Taxier importantly notes that “OOO leaves no room for *absolute* banality, given the unstable gap between any sensual translation and its real counterpart.” Thus, landscape, as a sensual translation of place, only *seems* to be an adequate translation of that place.

⁴⁴¹ Adams refers to some of his own music as landscape. For example, he refers to “the landscapes of *Clouds [of Forgetting, Clouds of Unknowing]*” and describes how with that work he wanted to create “a *wholeness* of music with no extra-musical references—a sonic presence somehow equivalent to that of a vast landscape.” *Winter Music*, 116. Adams recognizes landscape as an appropriate, although fundamentally inadequate—that is, superficial (“on the surface” as opposed to “lacking depth”)—version of place, or what OOO calls a translation (the *sensual* version of a *real object*).

⁴⁴² Adams, “Programme Note for *In the White Silence*,” Wise Music Classical, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/57015/In-the-White-Silence--John-Luther-Adams/>.

⁴⁴³ Adams, *Winter Music*, 140.

the landscape itself [the musical work]—rather than our feelings about it—becomes the subject? Better yet: Can the listener and the landscape become one?”⁴⁴⁴ Adams craves an ontological flattening wherein listener (as subject) and landscape (as object) are both *objects*, or parts unified by a single object, and “feelings” are the result or aftermath of that union. Here again, OOO’s theory of art is useful for appreciating Adams’s unusual formalistic thinking: the listener and landscape “become one” (a new real object) as a formal consequence of the listener’s sincere absorption with the musical work (their experience of the work in its temporal unfolding). That union necessarily transpires on the interior of some other object, or place. It is place that ultimately determines the listener’s feelings about the musical experience. Landscape, on the other hand, is what a listener experiences within the interior of the hybrid object that comprises both listener and music. Landscape is not something *within* the musical work (as is the case for the ecological thought in Snider’s *Mass*); rather, it is a descriptive term for impressions that emerge within that musical experience. It is an attempt to paraphrase the place of music.

Landscape must be understood as primarily a correlate of human experience, a translation of the place on which it depends. In this sense, sonic geography also qualifies as a kind of landscape to the extent that it serves as a vehicle or instrument for detecting place. Landscape is something easily apprehended—it lends itself to vivid, literal descriptions, or at least those often suffice (it is therefore the product of *overmining*). By contrast, place is far more resistant to straightforward paraphrase. By abandoning the metaphor of landscape and instead reconceptualizing the notion of music as place as sonic geography, Adams moves away from the superficial elements associated with landscape.

⁴⁴⁴ Adams, *Winter Music*, 63.

When Adams states in an interview from 1998 that he has come to measure everything he does against “the overwhelming presence” of Alaska, one can interpret this in at least two ways: For Adams, Alaska is either an inscrutable place which represents certain inspirational features (*allure*), or Alaska is a place characterized primarily by certain qualities that withdraw from all knowledge or description (*theory*). When Adams writes that to be immersed in the Alaskan silence is “to be near the heart of [that] place,” he refers to the tension OOO calls *space* (experientially *allure*), the same tension OOO holds responsible for aesthetic experience of any kind, or one’s perception of nearness, intimacy, or distance with other objects. Standing somewhere in the vastness of the Alaskan wilderness, Adams turns his attention to the perceptible sonic features of the place in which he finds himself, a place that is strangely limitless (whose boundaries are ambiguous) and at odds with those features. When Adams writes that Alaska’s presence “can attune the ear in extraordinary ways” (a sentiment he finds reading R. Murray Schafer), he refers to the tension OOO calls *eidos* (experientially *theory*).⁴⁴⁵ A sensual Alaska sustains its beholder’s attention, while that beholder wonders what the true nature of that place is.

Alaska

Alaska, where Adams lived for thirty-six years, is the most significant source of inspiration for his reflections on music and place. Its vast, desolate landscapes and particular environmental conditions profoundly shaped his musical creativity, influencing not only the thematic content of his works but also his personal philosophical inquiries into how geography, sound, place, and music interrelate. In 2023, nearly a decade after leaving Alaska, Adams remarked: “I love Alaska

⁴⁴⁵ Adams, *Winter Music*, 9. Adams quotes R. Murray Schafer here.

with a passion that is almost erotic.”⁴⁴⁶ What sort of place is Alaska to Adams? How has Alaska influenced Adams as a composer? These questions have been investigated before. Within the theoretical framework of this project, however, it is necessary to pose them again.

After “Resonance of Place,” Adams’s thoughts about music and place appear sporadically in interviews, program notes, and his other writings, typically behind discussions of other topics. Often, statements that are not explicitly about music and place still suggest this topic. Usually these statements have to do with Alaska and its influence on his music. Adams scholars and Adams himself have discussed this influence at length.⁴⁴⁷ Gann writes in his foreword to *Winter Music*: “To Cowell’s rhythmic theories and Feldman’s monochromaticism, we must add: Alaska.”⁴⁴⁸ But for OOO, “influence” is a precarious term, since objects are always to some extent completely shielded from other objects, affected only by certain events while remaining completely untouched by others. The object-oriented thinker seeks instances of irreversible change in the life of objects. Here, I suggest a transformation from Adams’s early work to a “middle” period in the mid-1990s, indicated by Alaska’s symbiosis with Adams’s compositional career.⁴⁴⁹ This symbiosis occurs as a result of Adams’s assimilation of Alaskan qualities (via the sort of aesthetic mediation mentioned previously), the success of which is indicated by his individualized musical portrayal of those qualities.

⁴⁴⁶ Adams, “John Luther Adams in Conversation with Alex Ross,” YouTube video by The Great Northern Festival, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vb0WFe3sn8c>.

⁴⁴⁷ Herzogenrath, *The Farthest Place*.

⁴⁴⁸ Adams, *Winter Music*, i.

⁴⁴⁹ Symbiosis is a central concept of immaterialist theory: Harman, *Immaterialism*, 42–51.

At the end of his memoir, Adams writes that he was drawn to Alaska by a desire to incorporate into his life and art “certain qualities that Alaska represents.”⁴⁵⁰ For the object-oriented thinker, these are qualities that the object Alaska *emits*.⁴⁵¹ Adams named these qualities in one 1998 interview: “sprawling distances, unbroken silences, and incredible qualities of light.”⁴⁵² He notes that, over time, as his work matured, these qualities “gradually became less overt and more deeply assimilated into the music,” at which point he felt his music was no longer *about* place, “but had in a real sense become a place of its own.”⁴⁵³

At what point did those “Alaskan qualities” become assimilated into Adams’s music, and how? I will examine the first two here and save the last for the final section of this chapter. All three Alaskan qualities—space, silence, and light—first converge in Adams’s work *In the White Silence*, whose title alludes to all three. The preface to the score of this work indicates that Adams had, by that point, reached his own understanding of those terms. Assimilation is evidenced by the fact that Adams finds his own, original non-literal handling of those qualities as objects in their own right.

Assimilation involves two things, which may, for the sake of clarity, be called “immersion” and “feedback.” The qualities of a place, like Alaska, find their way into a

⁴⁵⁰ “I was drawn to Alaska by the land itself and by my own desire, in life and in my art, for certain qualities that Alaska represents. And living here for much of my creative life, I came to measure my own work and everything we human animals create against the overwhelming presence of this place. I know that my music would not be the same had I not made my home here. The influence of Alaska on my creative life is immeasurable.” Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 176.

Elsewhere, Adams writes: “As a young man I came north with the dream that I might discover a new kind of music here, that might be found only here. I was drawn to the North by the land itself and by my own desire, in my art and my soul, for certain qualities this place represents. This was my romantic vision.” Adams, *The Place*, 102.

⁴⁵¹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 96–99.

⁴⁵² Adams, “Sonic Geography of the Arctic,” interview by Gayle Young, John Luther Adams, 1998, <https://www.johnlutheradams.net/interviews/2>.

⁴⁵³ Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 176.

composer's music through that composer's immersion in them. A composer's containment by any given place means immersion in its qualities is inevitable. Like an Aeolian harp, the composer functions as a bridge that connects the place in which they are or have been immersed with the music that they create. Consequently, that composer's music then stylizes those qualities in its own particular way ("feedback"). OOO rejects any notion that an object, its parts, or its qualities can shift from one medium to another and remain the same. From Adams's point of view, without realizing it, the composer becomes what Harman at one point calls a "translation machine."⁴⁵⁴

In 2002, Adams wrote an article for *NewMusicBox* titled "Music, Place, and Space." It features an epigraph from Yi-Fu Tuan's philosophical work: "Place is security, space is freedom."⁴⁵⁵ In a philosophical mode, Adams writes in the article: "Listening to music, time and space become present to our ears. Since sound is slow, we hear space as time. The distance between here and there becomes then and now. Space is where the music comes from, and where it's going. *Place is where we are listening* [my emphasis]."⁴⁵⁶ This passage deserves attention, as Adams refers to three concepts that are important here (music, space, and place) and simultaneously reveals his philosophical interest in all three of them. This passage, more than

⁴⁵⁴ Harman writes: "[O]ne object translates another in more or less adequate way, and does so precisely by allowing the object to manifest itself as something more than all of its current effects in our world. Perception, intelligence, and language all serve as ways of translating objects into a sphere where objects come to be at issue for us. Somehow, different ranges or quantities of allure provide the basis for different quantities of sentient or cognitive power. Our bodily organs are nothing but translation machines, transforming various energies from the outer world into terms that we can grasp or fail to grasp, allowing objects to show their faces in new and more compelling ways than before." Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 245 and 248.

⁴⁵⁵ Much of Tuan's work on space and place is written from "the perspective of experience," as Malpas points out. Tuan characterizes experience as "a cover-all term for the various modes through which a person knows or constructs reality." Tuan's work "largely operates within a view of place as essentially a psychological of affective notion." Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 44.

⁴⁵⁶ Adams, "Music, Space, and Place," *NewMusicBox*, January 1, 2002, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/music-space-and-place/>.

any other, reveals Adams's understanding of space, which, as pointed out above, is one of the three Alaskan qualities.

The passage above implies both a musical performance and a listener together *somewhere*. Since the speed of sound waves invariably depends on the conditions of the medium through which the sound waves move, it may be said that a musical performance always arrives *late* to its listener.⁴⁵⁷ Its lateness corresponds to the amount of space (physical distance) between the performance and the listener. Adams therefore concludes that not only do we hear this space *as time*, but this space is both the *origin* and the *end* of the music, as the sound waves originate, persist, and dissipate within that particular space.⁴⁵⁸ Place, meanwhile, is *where the listener is relative to the music* (another reason a metaphysical investigation of place is so appropriate alongside Adams's thoughts about place: the idea brings both place and listener into question). Adams's train of thought becomes complicated by the fact that most listeners today typically experience music through headphones or earbuds.⁴⁵⁹ Consequently, the kind of space that Adams's passage above imagines (which, again, comprises physical distance between music and a listener) becomes difficult to conceptualize. Its conflation of space and time is untenable.⁴⁶⁰ The idea of place, however, as *where the listener is relative to the music*, stands as an intriguing

⁴⁵⁷ Similar thinking leads Morton to the main thesis of their book *Hell*: "The sacred is the feel of biology." Morton, *Hell*, 1.

⁴⁵⁸ Adams tends to think of space primarily as that which influences the behavior of sound. For example, he describes the concert hall at the University of Alaska and how it had an "audible influence" on the evolution of his music: "The hall seems especially well suited to the spacious textures of my music. Several of my works have been premiered and recorded in this hall, and a few years ago I composed a concert-length work for percussion and electronics [probably *Qilyaun*] specifically for the unique resonances of this space." Adams, "Music, Space, and Place."

⁴⁵⁹ Adams recognizes this in another *NewMusicBox* article: "Recordings have made it possible for us to experience virtually any music as chamber music, without being physically present at the original performance. Listening to a recording, we always have the best seat in the house." Adams, "Getting Inside the Music," *NewMusicBox*, February 1, 2001, <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/getting-inside-the-music/>.

⁴⁶⁰ For OOO, space and time are two distinct object-quality tensions.

metaphysical assertion. Space, for Adams's music, is perhaps best articulated in object-oriented fashion as the tension between the withdrawn reality of place and its sensual qualities.

Silence is the most important quality of the three that Adams identified. The title of his memoir itself (taken from a poem by his friend, the Alaskan poet John Haines) may be read as a reference to its significance in relation to his creative thinking and work. In the performance notes for *songbirdsongs*, Adams implores the performers: "Don't be afraid of silences! They are essential to this music."⁴⁶¹ In that work, silence is handled literally and is signaled by the conventional use of rests in the score.⁴⁶² Eighteen years later, though, Adams writes in the preface to *In the White Silence* (1998): "Silence is not the absence of sound. It is the presence of stillness."⁴⁶³ This disclaimer signals a new stage in Adams's compositional path. *In the White Silence* marks the assimilation of the three Alaskan qualities in Adams's work. This assimilation corresponds to the subtlety with which those qualities are conveyed or, more specifically, the degree to which those qualities are transmitted in some non-literal fashion.

Adams continues to pursue silence as an essential component of his musical work, but in 1998 he understands silence not merely as the absence of sound but now "the presence of stillness," a phrase which suggests that the qualities associated with silence itself have become parts or objects of Alaska as opposed to one of its qualities. In *White Silence*, there is no "true silence." Sound is always present from one of the instruments. Adams treats silence itself as an object that takes on sonic qualities, an object-oriented recognition that any object emits *sensual*

⁴⁶¹ Adams, *songbirdsongs*, full score (Taiga Press, 2009).

⁴⁶² Shimoni, "Ecological Aspects of the Music of John Luther Adams," 88.

⁴⁶³ Adams also notes in the preface that "silence endures as a deep and resonant metaphor" (despite Cage's potent reminder that silence does not literally exist). Adams, *In the White Silence*, full score (Taiga Press, 1998).

qualities. (“Stillness isn’t static,” Morton writes: “Stillness is alive, quivering.”⁴⁶⁴) Stillness is not the absence of sound, nor is it the absence of movement either.⁴⁶⁵ Polymetric and polyrhythmic relationships abound in Adams’s music (*Become Ocean* is a representative example). Rhythmic complexity is the rule rather than the exception, although Adams typically employs this complexity for the sake of *stillness* rather than movement. “I rarely use literal repetition in music,” Adams writes: “Something is always changing, even when the surface sounds more or less the same.”⁴⁶⁶

From an object-oriented perspective, by de-literalizing the three main qualities he attributes to Alaska, Adams attempts to bring his listener closer to its reality, closer to some place. *Some* place, to be sure, because to suggest that that place *just is* Alaska is to reject the claim made in the previous section that musical experiences create new real places. A musical work may resemble Alaska, or some other place, but those resemblances alone are never enough to constitute a sufficient description of that work. Thus, the places Adams’s works create may be characterized as Alaskan.

This covers two of the three Alaskan qualities (space and silence). Light, or color, remains. In the next section I discuss that last quality in relation to Adams’s installation *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, a work in which all three of the “Alaskan qualities” are present in

⁴⁶⁴ Morton, “Appearance is War,” in *The War of Appearances*, eds. Jake Brouwer, Lars Spuybrock, and Sjoerd van Tuinen (V2_Publishing, 2016), 168.

⁴⁶⁵ Silence is stillness, but stillness is activity. Adams does not shy away from the kind of paradoxical thinking that is characteristic of OOO. In a 2011 interview, he remarked: “There is a point at which noise and silence are the same thing.” Adams, “John Luther Adams: The Music of a True Place,” posted June 2, 2011, by *NewMusicBox*, YouTube, 0:15–0:20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoOfyNZQsUE>.

⁴⁶⁶ Adams, *Winter Music*, 122.

In his music, Adams’s often explores compositional ideas expressed in Cowell’s *New Musical Resources* (1930), a book which proved to have a formative influence on Adams’s musical thinking in his youth, as it did for so many other American composers before him. See Gann, “Foreword,” xiii. For Adams, compositional techniques found in Cowell’s book become means to capturing Alaskan qualities in his music.

their mature, de-literalized form. *The Place* brings all of the overall qualities of place outlined earlier in this chapter to the foreground of experience. It also brings together the topics discussed in the subsections above.

The Place Where You Go to Listen

The previous sections covered the ways in which Adams thinks about place, in general and in relation to music. Sonic geography categorizes musical works that somehow capture the distinct, perceptible qualities of individual places. Translation describes the process by which those works (or their composers) capture those qualities. Landscape is the beguiling, shallow product of a beholder-work relation which diverts one's attention from the place of music. For Adams, Alaska is the center around which the philosophical views implicit in both concepts (sonic geography and translation) revolve. All three things collide in apparently equal measure in one of his most compelling works, *The Place Where You Go to Listen*.

The Place is a permanent sound and light installation at the Museum of the North in Fairbanks, Alaska (since 2006). The work translates real-time geophysical data—seismic activity, weather patterns, the intensity of the sun's solar power, the phases of the moon, even the aurora borealis—into a continuous, open-ended musical work that never repeats itself. Adams calls it “a resonating chamber”—a place in which “the vibrations of natural forces are transposed and amplified within the reach of our ears.”⁴⁶⁷ But Adams's primary intention with *The Place* is not simply the translation of scientific data into sound; it is instead “to provoke experience.” *The*

⁴⁶⁷ Adams, *The Place Where You Go to Listen: In Search of an Ecology of Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 105. Extensive details about the work can be found in this book. Additional commentary on specific aspects of the work can be found in Kinnear, “Voicing Nature,” 230–39.

Adams created another installation with similar ideas many years later—“The Wind Garden” (2017): <https://stuartcollection.ucsd.edu/artist/adams.html#about-the-installation>.

Place is a large-scale, twenty-first-century version of an Aeolian harp—a translation machine, in which one becomes immersed, or a part of, physically. “As we attune ourselves to the mind of *The Place*,” Adams writes, “we learn to hear its music. Listening carefully, we become part of it.”⁴⁶⁸

The installation comprises a room measuring approximately ten feet by twenty feet with a single bench in the center. Speakers are hidden in the walls and the ceiling, and the room is filled with light and sound. *The Place* has no beginning, no middle, and no end, no ultimate outcome. Feisst calls it “Adams’s most intriguing realization of ‘sonic geography’ to date.”⁴⁶⁹ Indeed, more than any other work in Adams’s oeuvre, *The Place* highlights Adams’s fascination with place. More than any other work, *The Place* represents the culmination of the philosophical ideas that have engaged Adams’s creative imagination since the start of his life as a composer.

Adams notes that the dominant architectural feature of the work is the twenty-by-ten-foot wall coated with a frosted white surface that is illuminated for “fields of floating color.”⁴⁷⁰ The colors constantly change in real time with the movements of the sun. While “there may seem to be no perceptible change from moment to moment,” Adams points out, “within several hours, change is pronounced. Over days and months, from winter to summer, the change becomes increasingly dramatic.”⁴⁷¹ The beholder is meant to attribute the sound qualities to the light and colors that they observe. The beholder may attribute the qualities of the sun itself to the visual aspect of the work. This is the opposite of works like *In the White Silence*, *Dream In White On White*, or *The Light That Fills the World* (2000). Adams suggests that the primary sonic

⁴⁶⁸ Adams, *The Place*, 106.

⁴⁶⁹ Feisst, “Music as Place, Place as Music,” 42.

⁴⁷⁰ Adams, *The Place*, 116.

⁴⁷¹ Adams, *The Place*, 117.

atmosphere of the work is “audible light.” Light and color take on the qualities of sound. This is Adams’s solution to de-literalizing the last of the three Alaskan qualities.

The Place translates what is ubiquitous (weather patterns, the cycles of day and night, and geophysical activity). As an installation work—a work that requires its beholder to be physically present somewhere specific—it plainly contains and excludes its audience.⁴⁷² Although the work includes elements of chance (a random number generator), it stylizes the data it receives in ways carefully selected by Adams. Because the work never repeats itself, it seems to resist any kind of straightforward interpretive or analytical commentary. One beholder’s experience will vary widely from the next. Finally, the work emphasizes that the experience of its beholder can only belong to the future. Although a permanent installation in a specific location on a map, *The Place* draws attention to the rift between an object and its ever-shifting qualities.

After its completion, Adams remarked that it “feels like the start of something I can only begin to imagine, suggesting questions that I’ve not yet learned to ask.”⁴⁷³ This suggests that Adams understands the work as a philosophical one. The main question the work raises, though, is: what *is* (this) place? *The Place* affirms that a musical experience always involves a new object formed by the union of beholder and music. *The Place* highlights the claim presented here, that all musical works function as a medium for a place, that they create new, real places. Sonic geography is, in the end, *the place where you go to listen*. Sonic geography is not a

⁴⁷² Since *The Place* requires its beholder to physically relocate themselves to experience it, it demands a certain degree of formality. This aspect of the work is also *the goal of the musical experience*, which is to take the listener somewhere, to a new place. Thus, the conscious act of going to the installation is part of that experience. Adams hopes that every visitor will carry some of the work’s qualities back into the world with them, which in turn may encourage new ways of listening: “When we leave *The Place*, the music continues. Perhaps we carry some of it back with us, back into the larger world. And perhaps we find ourselves listening in a new way.” Adams, *The Place*, 104. This quote also highlights Adams’s implicit interest in the philosophical notion of aesthetic causality, which this chapter has sought to highlight.

⁴⁷³ Adams, *The Place*, 100.

compositional technique or an abstract concept exclusive to Adams's work, it is a philosophical framework that redefines interactions between a musical work, its listener, and its encompassing place.

While Adams's music often lends itself to imaginative, vivid (literal) descriptions, such descriptions miss the point. Place is the heart of Adams's music, and as Adams asserts, "it can take a lifetime to truly know a place."⁴⁷⁴ Place withdraws behind a swirling patina of sensual qualities—its essence remains an enduring question for Adams.⁴⁷⁵ Even after forty years, Alaska is still a source inspiration for Adams—a real place, a question. Its cold, stark, and snowy landscapes forever veil its hidden interior. For Adams, Alaska is an object in alluring tension with its own qualities, a "true place," something he has strived to replicate throughout his compositional career. His music encapsulates an attempt not to describe some place, but to evoke the irreducible gap between what it is and how it appears.

At the end of his memoir, Adams writes:

Because Alaska is such a powerful place, it may influence artists who live here more directly than geography influences artists in many other places. But as global climate change continued to accelerate, my personal vision of Alaska as a world apart was challenged in an inescapable way, and I felt a growing imperative to expand music to embrace a broader vision of the world.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ Adams, *Winter Music*, 24. The length of many of Adams's works may remind listeners that place is something with which one must inevitably learn to coexist.

⁴⁷⁵ Morton suggests that place is inherently interrogative—something approached through a questioning attitude. Place is "radically indeterminate," they write: "it is in question"—it *is* a question. Morton, "John Clare and the Question of Place," 108. Malpas argues that it is through "the return to place, and to a mode of thinking that is attuned to place, that the possibility of genuine questioning—as well as listening—itself appears." Malpas, "Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place," *Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology* 25, no. 1 (2014), 23. Place therefore shares something with *environment*; both cannot be indicated directly—both are "*in question*, questioningness." Morton, "John Clare and the Question of Place," 109.

⁴⁷⁶ Adams, *Silences So Deep*, 176.

Some places have irreversible effects on the objects that encounter them.⁴⁷⁷ Adams poses two questions which suggest a hopeful attitude toward his own work: “Can music be engaged with current events and at the same time detached from them? Can music resonate with the world around us, and yet still create a world of its own?”⁴⁷⁸ These questions go against a basic assumption in ecological criticism, namely that everything is, in some way, interconnected. Morton reminds those working with this assumption that, in the end, one must pay attention to what precisely is interconnected with what.⁴⁷⁹ The idea of object-oriented place proposed here introduces at least one relevant interpretive and analytical question with respect to Morton’s observation: What does it mean to coexist with *this particular musical work*? According to this view, music is no longer something *over there* but something listeners find themselves *with somewhere*, and place is the conduit for reflecting on that coexistence.

The object-oriented place offered here helpfully brings the two most important aspects of Adams’s philosophy of music together. Those two aspects are: a belief that a musical work can create a real place, which is relevant to Adams’s most significant creative endeavors, and a non-anthropocentric, or ecological, appreciation of relationships between entities, which is relevant to the environmentalist ethos that continues to shape Adams’s thinking. It must be remembered that the term “beholder” may be either human or nonhuman. One can speak of how Adams’s outdoor music emplaces nonhuman things: one can speak, for instance, of the bird whose calls are stifled by the sounds of an outdoor performance, or the bird who flees in response to those sounds. In both cases, the music creates a new world, a new reality. OOO’s emphasis on the autonomy of

⁴⁷⁷ Aristotle famously notes that “place is requisite even for grasping change itself”: the most basic kind of change is change in respect of place. Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 51.

⁴⁷⁸ Adams, “Making Music in the Anthropocene.”

⁴⁷⁹ Morton, “Here Comes Everything.”

objects illuminates how Adams's musical works can create distinct places that engage with, yet remain irreducible to, their place of origin, or environmental contexts. An object-oriented perspective like this challenges anthropocentric assumptions by acknowledging nonhuman entities (like the sun, the moon, and geophysical forces in *The Place*) as co-participants in the musical experience.

Theoretically, OOO does not permit a beholder to get *inside* the music as Adams wishes. It does, however, permit a beholder to get inside *the place of that music*, which is, I have argued, more consistent with Adams's thoughts about music and place. Adams's outdoor works, for instance, require the separate autonomy of the musical work and place. The fact that the musical work and the place *of* that work are two distinct objects does not diminish Adams's idea of "sonic geography" or "music as place"; in fact, it bolsters that idea. With his early experiments with sonic geography, Adams attempted to blend music and place together, to make music that *is* place. The problem with this, of course, is that a musical work is a musical work and a place is a place. The concept of music as place(-making) discussed in this chapter makes it possible to talk about the intersection of both, though. For if music is to be (at all), it must be in (some) place. More precisely, if a *musical experience* is to be (at all), it must be in (some) place. Adams's outdoor works are a continuation of his interest in sonic geography—the most recent, and clearest example of the idea. These works demonstrate how a musical work *must* exist in some place; how a musical work can interact with, mediate, and transform a place, and how, ultimately, a musical work creates a new real place.

I have emphasized that it is more accurate to say *place* is more central to Adams's work than nature, environment, landscape, or anything else. Adams is changed by place, and his model

is place, too.⁴⁸⁰ Place is the fundamental idea that has guided Adams's creative development, not just a recurring theme in his thoughts and work. Crucially, the emphasis here is not solely on the prominence of place in Adams's creative work, but on the interpretive clarity that emerges when one considers Adams's engagement with place through the lens of OOO. The evidence presented in this chapter reveals that while Adams may be a "Green" composer, he is also an object-oriented one.

Adams's essay "Global Warming and Art" provides a poignant end to his first book, *Winter Music*. There, Adams wonders about the meaning of his work, the value of it in the face of war and ecological catastrophe: "How can I make art," he asks both himself and the reader, "that doesn't speak directly to world events?"⁴⁸¹ Adams recalls how, with the First World War raging just miles from his home, Monet painted his water lilies. Adams reasons that "to give their

⁴⁸⁰ Scholars, critics, and listeners have long recognized Adams as a composer closely associated with ideas of nature and environment—an "environmentalist composer." This is how a recent program note describes him: <https://kayentaarts.org/event/john-luther-adams-crossing-open-ground/>.

Mitchell Morris, in the first piece of scholarship on Adams and his music, identified Adams as a "Green composer," which Morris defines as "an ally [...] in the various eco-sensitive discourses that have proliferated since the 1960s"; a composer who operates "in the realm of culture-making," and whose music, in general, is in contact with "the aesthetic and ethical concerns of strong environmentalism." Mitchell Morris, "Ecotopian Sounds, or, The Music of John Luther Adams and Strong Environmentalism," in *Crosscurrents and Counterpoints: Offerings in Honor of Bengt Hambraeus at 70*, edited by Bengt Hambraeus, Per F. Broman, and Bo Harry Alphonse (Göteborgs Universitet, 1998), 131–32. Consequently, the music of a Green composer would not be esoteric. Instead its "aesthetic character," as Morris calls it, "would give it a reach extending to more mainstream realms of culture-making as well." Morris, "Ecotopian Sounds," 131–32. In other words, a Green composer's music, by virtue of its inspiration from something that is common all over the world (Nature) would be accessible to a wider audience than the music of a composer inspired by the pyramids in Egypt. Regarding Morris's label, Adams writes: "I don't object to this. After all, I have been active in the Green Party in Alaska. But the context of my work goes beyond environmental activism and Green politics to a larger sense of place and culture. So I interpret Morris's use of the term 'Green' in relation to my music as cultural and philosophical rather than narrowly political." Adams, *Winter Music*, 124.

George Grella, writing for the *New York Classical Review*, asserts that to say Adams is inspired by nature misses the point. "Adams is changed by nature," Grella writes, "and his music is a catalogue of the places that changed him." George Grella, "Personal and Public, John Luther Adams' New Work Rises from the Crypt," October 22, 2019, <https://newyorkclassicalreview.com/2019/10/personal-and-public-luther-adams-new-work-rises-from-the-crypt/>. Similarly, Kyle Gann, in his foreword to Adams's first published book, writes that "Adams's model is nature." Adams, *Winter Music*, xvi.

⁴⁸¹ Adams, *Winter Music*, 182–183.

best gifts to the world artists must sometimes leave the world behind, at least for a little while.”⁴⁸² In art, in music, and in place, Adams found hope for the future. The notion of futurity, of *meaningfulness* as opposed to *meaning*, is inherent in OOO’s conception of art (something Morton is keen to point out throughout *Realist Magic*). In that same essay, Adams recognizes that art works on different timescales: “Politics is fast. By definition it is public. Art is slow.”⁴⁸³ Adams’s polytempic, polyrhythmic musical structures point to essential aspects of ecological awareness as Morton defines it: ecological awareness entails thinking and acting on a lot of scales, not just one, and realizing that there are lots of different temporality formats, since “*everything has its own time*, its own temporality,” at least according to OOO.⁴⁸⁴

Listening to music may not be the most effective strategy for responding to contemporary environmental issues, but as the object-oriented perspective outlined here reveals, its value rests in the old Aristotelian notion that contemplation is the highest form of praxis. Listeners may

⁴⁸² Adams, *Winter Music*, 183.

⁴⁸³ Adams, *Winter Music*, 183.

Adams reiterates this belief in 2015: “As a composer, I believe that music has the power to inspire a renewal of human consciousness, culture, and politics. And yet I refuse to make political art. More often than not political art fails as politics, and all too often it fails as art. To reach its fullest power, to be most moving and most fully useful to us, art must be itself.” Adams, “Making Music in the Anthropocene.”

In a 2018 interview, Adams re-emphasizes his belief that politics and art are separate and that he prefers to stay away from “political art.” He recalls how as a political activist in Alaska (he served as executive director of the Northern Alaska Environmental Center for several years), his music and health suffered: “It became clear that I had to make a choice,” he writes in one Guardian article, “between politics and music.” Adams, “I want my art to matter. I want it to be of use.”: John Luther Adams,” *The Guardian*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/oct/30/john-luther-adams-composer-become-ocean>.

As an environmental activist in Alaska he realized that he “didn’t have the courage for a life in politics,” as he puts it in one interview, and that his “leap of faith into art was the belief that, in its own way, cultural work can matter every bit as much as politics.” Wilkinson, “Becoming JLA.”

And from the same interview above, Adams states: “In recent years I’ve come to believe that, fundamentally, [art] matters more [than politics]. Because it is slow—‘Ars longa, vita brevis.’ If we look back on history, mostly what we remember, at least of the good parts of societies and civilizations, is the culture.” Wilkinson, “Becoming JLA.”

⁴⁸⁴ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 23 and 79.

hang environmental or political concerns on Adams's music, but as Adams himself remarked: "none of that means anything if the music doesn't succeed, if it doesn't touch in some deep, inarticulate place as music, first and foremost."⁴⁸⁵ Harman writes: "Human comportment towards the world, even if only towards illusions, is itself a new kind of reality in its own right."⁴⁸⁶ Adams speculates: "Maybe art is the home we're always building for ourselves, somewhere between the stark truths of the world as it is and our longing for the world as we dream it."⁴⁸⁷ To treat music as art, as sonic geography, for instance, is to treat it as a place of coexistence—a much needed place if we plan on becoming more sensitive to and more attuned to nonhuman things. The different worlds or places that music creates give rise to a new reality for each listener—new geographies of hope. Here is the significance of understanding music as place(-making) as formulated here: The possibility of imagining a different future.

⁴⁸⁵ Wilkinson, "Becoming JLA."

⁴⁸⁶ Harman, "The Only Exit from Modern Philosophy," *Open Philosophy* 3 (2020), 138.

⁴⁸⁷ Adams, *Winter Music*, 172.

CONCLUSION

Like any field that adopts a posthumanist orientation, ecomusicology strives to challenge human exceptionalism, to understand concepts like nature, environment, or place beyond human-centered perspectives. Ecomusicology is driven by an aspiration to abandon anthropocentrism in favor of ecocentric or ecological approaches. But abandoning anthropocentrism does not just mean decentering humans in favor of focusing on nonhuman things instead. Abandoning anthropocentrism really means turning to *everything*, and OOO insists that humans are just one type of entity among many. Humans are not ontologically exceptional. Its initial starting point as a flat ontology is conducive to the goals of ecomusicology. After all, there is no more ecological position to take.

Additionally, rather than casting all things as actors in an infinitely vast and interconnected network, thereby reducing all things to their effects on other things (and thereby also eliminating their potential to have *different* effects than those they currently have), OOO insists on the autonomous reality of all objects. Accepting the reality of objects remains withdrawn means recognizing nonhuman things on their own terms rather than following anthropocentric models of reduction or mastery. For ecomusicology, this means first finding ways of prioritizing the autonomy of musical objects, of appreciating their reality apart from their surrounding historical, political, environmental, or other contexts. It also means recognizing their reality as something more than their constituent parts. As previously covered, OOO's solution involves countermethods, which ultimately entail severing an object from its constituent parts or qualities in an effort to unveil what makes that object *that* object. This is fundamentally an ecocritical endeavor as it involves treating objects as they ask to be treated.

Prioritizing the autonomy of musical works supports practice for the treatment of other nonhuman things, too. A musical work is a nonhuman thing. Loving or caring for music, something demonstrated by practicing musicians everywhere, means, at least in part, tolerating its existence to the fullest extent. Why not extend that practice to other nonhuman things, too? From an object-oriented perspective, music provides a model for coexistence. OOO provides a productive theoretical framework for examining music in ecocritical ways without resorting to commonplace assumptions about nature, environment, or relations between humans and nonhumans. It provides a robust theoretical framework for ecomusicology, as it ensures an ecological perspective, whatever the object of study.

What is the significance of OOO in relation to twenty-first-century ecological music specifically? For OOO, causality belongs to the aesthetic dimension. Ecological awareness in the twenty-first century requires acknowledging that *being is not presence*, while still maintaining a commitment to *reality*. Global warming is never immediately present but nevertheless *real*. Ecomusicology requires some way of discussing the reality of ecological crises, and OOO provides a model for how those crises exist. Moreover, since causality is aesthetic, ecomusicology requires some way of understanding how music mediates encounters with nonhuman things. OOO's theory of art responds to that concern. Adams's *Become Ocean* is not merely a work "about" the ocean but an alluring translation of an object that draws its beholder's attention to a deeper reality. Art reminds us that the world is not just how humans make it. Ecological music is a site for the aestheticization of any object, even those excluded from familiar ideas of nature or the environment. Industrial materials, waste and debris, technological equipment, microorganisms, subatomic particles, and everyday objects stand alongside forests, fields, lakes, rivers, mountains, volcanoes, and oceans within the domain of ecological music.

Now I turn to an overview of my three chapters and OOO as a method. As a method, object-oriented analysis will involve the mapping and interpretation of object-quality tensions, the gaps between objects and their qualities (*ontography*). All three chapters sought to figure out what twenty-first-century music by American composers has to say about the biosphere that we inhabit. Granted, the sample of composers and works was small. Nevertheless, those composers and works I examined reveal something important about ecological music, or music that inspires ecological awareness. In retrospect, each chapter may be seen from at least three different angles. Each angle corresponds to one of the three guiding research questions of this project. The first two questions were: How has American music since the turn of the century handled contemporary environmental concerns? And in what ways can OOO provide a framework for understanding that music?

Chapter 1 illustrated how *Mass for the Endangered* engages with eco-anxiety by making topics related to nature and environment ambiguous, and demonstrated at least one way in which Morton's object-oriented and conceptual work can be integrated with ecocritical approaches to music studies. There, I read two of Morton's most influential concepts (*the ecological thought* and *dark ecology*) as fundamentally object-oriented and illustrated how both may be read alongside musical interpretation and analysis. By disrupting ordinary conceptions of nature and the environment, *Mass for the Endangered* reflects on what it means to engage with environmental concerns in the twenty-first century. Dark ecology characterizes that engagement. As widely recognized throughout the environmental humanities, conventional conceptions of nature and environment as *things-over-there*, unaltered by human activity, must be substituted for ecological thinking that accepts anthropogenic causes of global ecological instability. Ecological

thinking therefore must embrace melancholy, disgust, horror, abjection, or the uncanny interconnectivity of human and nonhuman things.

Chapter 2 showed how Caroline Shaw's *The Evergreen* can inspire intimacy with natural objects through its non-literal depiction of those objects and connected Morton's understanding of an object-oriented sublime to musical aesthetics. Each zone of dark ecology, which Chapter 1 imagined as a depthless ocean, is not without some warmth provided by occasional rays of light from the surface of above. Dark ecology gives way to what Morton calls *dark-sweetness*, a joyful longing. Morton's object-oriented sublime enables discussion about the overwhelming or overpowering affective power of ecological music but not in ways that revert to traditional conceptions of nature as some dominating, uncontrollable force. Instead, an object-oriented sublime imagines objects as vulnerable, fragile, even kind. If dark ecology characterizes twenty-first-century ecological thinking, then the object-oriented sublime enables discussion about the irreducibly strange objects that thinking brings forth.

Chapter 3 revealed that John Luther Adams addresses contemporary environmental concerns indirectly by pursuing his own aesthetic ideals and that those ideals are derived from a philosophy of music that is fundamentally object-oriented. For Adams, *music as place* means *music as if place* ("as" must be understood in the purely conjunctive sense), since the two things, music and place, cannot be one and the same. With the help of OOO, it is possible to appreciate music as place(-making), an idea that does justice to Adams's notion of sonic geography, or *music as place* in the literal sense Adams means. Adams's sonic geography engages environmental concerns by turning its listener's attention to both the future (the experience of place) and the past (contemplation of that place).

The idea of music as place suggests three things simultaneously. First, listeners associate music with a particular place or vice versa. Those associations range from the general to the personal, from national anthems to music heard in one's childhood home. What music one associates with what place is highly subjective, though, an aspect of place that cannot be ignored. Second, place shapes how one hears music, just as music shapes how one experiences place. An outdoor concert blends a musical performance with its surrounding natural environment while a familiar nightclub feels uncanny in the absence of sound. From a musicological perspective, place either contains music or is devoid of music and is therefore always in some way related to music. Third, and what interests Adams most of all, is the idea that music can *make new places* or transform (the experience of) existing ones. The proposed idea of music as place(-making) is a nexus for human and nonhuman entities alike. Once music is understood as place(-making) in this threefold sense then *all music is environmental* because *all music has something to say about being ecological*, about coexistence.

The third guiding research question was: How might an object-oriented framework reshape the methods and priorities of ecocritical music studies? To that, I also add: What are some *specific* implications of the chapters above? Each chapter gravitates around one central idea which, considered separately and through the lens of OOO, points to a few significant implications for ecocritical music studies and reinforces the ecological commitments implicit within OOO itself.

Chapter 1 suggests that *music is ontologically deep*. What does this mean? On one hand, this idea merely repeats a basic principle of OOO: objects remain irreducibly withdrawn. A musical work remains *that particular work* across time. The reality of a musical work remains impenetrable to any form of bombardment, whether from political ideologies, prevailing cultural

attitudes, or the tides of academic trends. On the other hand, the idea highlights the need for an ecocritical stance that emphasizes attunement to the reality of something not-us. Listeners attune to a given work to uncover what objects it contains, to get a feel for its geography. Like sonar technicians aboard a submersible, they explore the depths of an unknown region. Pings allude to its geography: its slopes, ridges, knolls, and banks, features which *can* over time transform by accruing new characteristics or completely eroding. The recognition of unexpected and surprising new features within that geography indicates some kind of transformation has occurred. Historical ecomusicology, when its object of study is a musical work, may be called the mapping of that geography across time.

Mass for the Endangered acts as a host to the ecological thought, the object which is the source of ecological awareness (according to Morton), and stylizes that object according to the aesthetics of dark ecology, which correspond to the aesthetics of the Anthropocene. I called the practice of uncovering what objects belong to a musical work dark-ecological listening, a reflective mode of listening that remains suspended in a state of wonder or speculation about the reality of a work, makes no claims about said work *a priori*, and therefore recognizes coexistence as the most basic prerequisite of any ecocritical endeavor. Dark-ecological listening is reflective in the sense that the listener must reflect on the physicality of the music, which encompasses everything from corporeal reactions to mental imagery (those two things are two sides of the same coin). As a tool for finding what objects may belong to a work, dark-ecological listening entails following the feeling of dark ecology, which is first depressing, then uncanny, and finally sweet. The arrival at each zone signals the presence of an object which only the interpreter-analyst can name. Analysis itself becomes an ecocritical or ecological endeavor when it strives to share those discoveries with other, future listeners. Dark-ecological listening involves

indirect approaches or countermethods, which OOO acknowledges as the most effective way for dealing with the reality of any object.

Chapter 2 suggests that *music is coexistence*. *The Evergreen* presents alluring translations of moss, a tree's stem, the water that feeds it, and its roots. Listeners find themselves enacting the reality of the objects to which those translations allude (aesthetic experience does not happen by choice). Music takes the form of coexistence because theatricality just is coexistence.

Theatricality as coexistence offers a lens through which human-nonhuman encounters via music can be brought into focus. Music is not simply an object interpreted by an initially disinterested subject but a phenomenon co-constituted by human and nonhuman entities alike, something made real through human-nonhuman collaboration.

For OOO, all art is anthropocentric in that it requires a human beholder. All art is, in a sense, performance art—all art is *theatrical*. This does not mean that a work of art can only produce human-centered interpretations, only reinforce anthropocentric worldviews, or only bring about human-centered points of view, though. Theatricality suggests that it is within the aesthetic domain of art that the realities of nonhuman things may be rendered more perceptible (more *available*) to human beings. Art is paradoxical: It is human(-centered) experience where *intimacy* with nonhuman things takes place, an intimacy constituted primarily by *distance* from those same things. Art presents itself as a site for thinking ecologically, for thinking coexistence. Ecological music reveals how easy it is to coexist non-violently with nonhuman things.

Additionally, theatricality presents a possible avenue for the exploration of nonhuman points of view.⁴⁸⁸ Beyond straightforward representation, what does it mean for music to ask

⁴⁸⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty poses the following question: “[S]ince what the humanities and the human sciences provide are perspectives from which to debate the issues of our times, can they overcome their hallowed and deeply set human-centrism and learn to look at the human world also from nonhuman points of view?” Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Humanities in the Anthropocene: The Crisis of an Enduring Kantian Fable,” *New Literary History* 47 (2016), 391.

listener to inhabit a nonhuman point of view? As opposed to the usual understanding of “point of view,” which typically refers to the way in which *other* things appear to an object, a point of view may be thought of as a relation between an object and its own perceptible qualities, the way in which an object appears to itself, or the object that a beholder “brings to life” by enacting its reality.⁴⁸⁹ This is not anthropomorphism but a sincere attempt by a beholder to participate in the reality of some other thing. Whether or not a poem from a bird’s perspective actually, genuinely captures the reality of the bird’s perspective is beside the point. This is especially true for the object-oriented stance taken here, though. The issue has to do with the perspective toward reality itself, and for OOO, a bird has no greater access to reality than humans do. Likewise, the bird has no more access to the reality of its own perspective than the most studious of ornithologists.

Theatricality suggests that for a musical experience to involve a nonhuman point of view, that experience must necessarily contain a sonic depiction of (or allusion to) an object in tense fusion with its qualities (de-literalization), perhaps most reasonably one that a nonhuman thing regularly encounters, too. Music can depict or generate imagery of an object in such a way that any aesthetic effect that that depiction may harbor would necessitate its listener’s performance or enactment of that object. Given that a work is likely to generate as many variations of imagery as there are listeners, the aim of analysis is not to provide definitive clarity on the imagery that a work produces but to draw attention to the ways in which the work resists or obscures it.⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁹ It follows from OOO’s critique of reductionism that one should resist the temptation to preemptively reduce a nonhuman point of view to its nonhuman origin. No sensual translation of any object is more accurate than any other.

It is also conceivable, though, that a beholder may imagine themselves in some new relation in which both terms of that relation may be characterized as nonhuman. That relation would not constitute an instance of alluring tension, though, which is responsible for the aesthetic effects that are of primary interest to beholders.

⁴⁹⁰ Imagery does not belong to or inside the work but belongs to the listener. To say that a work “evokes imagery” is a convenient shorthand for saying that beholder-work collaboration gives rise to new perceptual experiences for the beholder.

Chapter 3 suggests that *music is place*. This idea derives mainly from the previous one. More accurately, music creates new real places. Consistent with OOO, the places that music creates remain irreducible to those experiences (praxis) or any retrospective knowledge about them (theory). Musical experiences (whether literal or non-literal) do not happen or exist in a temporary void or in some alternate reality but always unfold here in the middle of things. Neither are listeners vacuum-sealed in the listener-music hybrid confronted only by “the music itself.” Instead, one experiences the sights and sounds of the world around them concurrently with any musical experience. The soothing sound of raindrops gently tapping a window can aid the calming effect of Adams’s *the place where we began* while the chaotic sounds of a city may add to the spiritual clamor of *Qilyaun*. The listener-music hybrid permits the entry of any sensual object that may be contiguous with the experience of the music.

Ecological awareness means recognizing that social space is not entirely human. Ecocritical music studies must have a way of talking about musical works as discrete objects, ones that make connections to other objects, and the type of formalism that OOO provides is a productive way forward. According to that view, musical works are shielded from their external context (contextual elements enter a work if they become present in some non-literal sense); irreducible to their various constitutive elements, since modifications may be made to a work without any alterations to the work as whole, and most importantly, they provide experiences that are never immune to the influence of the world outside. OOO formalism offers a way of recognizing how nonhuman things participate in musical experience. The proposed idea of “music as place” enables consideration of music-nonhuman relations in the same vein as music-human relations (minus any division between literal and nonliteral experience), which is to say

that nonhuman-music and human-music relations are no different in kind. Both present the same ontological structure for analysis, interpretation, and discussion.

Ecological awareness means seeing how humans are included in the biosphere as one being among others. Ecological music is music that makes that sentiment explicit, that allows one to co-exist with other entities in unexpected and surprising ways. More concretely, though, ecological music is music that de-literalizes the ecological thought, inspires coexistence with nonhuman things by inviting beholders to theatrically enact their particular mode of being, and creates new real places. In other words, ecological music can be defined as *music that creates new gaps between objects and their qualities*. Following the object-oriented thinking that helped formulate that definition, and in the spirit of philosophical inquiry, a question highlights the significance of this project in relation to ecomusicological study: What music *isn't* ecological?

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