Dirty Modernism: Ecological Objects in American Poetry

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Abstract  
This dissertation examines how early-to-mid twentieth century American poetry is preoccupied with objects that unsettle the divide between nature and culture. Given the entanglement of these two domains, I argue that American modernism is “dirty.” This designation leads me to sketch what I call “dirty modernism,” which includes the registers of waste, energy, animality, raciality, and the sensual. Reading these registers, I turn to what I call “ecological objects,” or representations of how nature and culture come together, which includes trash, natural resources, inanimals, and tools. Through an ecocritical mode of analysis, I introduce dirty modernism with the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. In chapter 1, I turn to William Carlos Williams’ relationship with waste and explore what it means to be a literary dumpster diver. In chapter 2, I explore the energy humanities and show how natural resources inform Gertrude Stein’s poetry. In chapter 3, I theorize what I call the “inanimal,” which registers the tension between life and death through an exploration of animal objecthood in a wide range of modernist poetry. In chapter 4, I read the work of Claude McKay, Sterling A. Brown, and Jean Toomer to investigate a crisis around the interchange of African American workers and their labour and tools. To conclude, I return to the Baroness and offer some final thoughts, which are followed by a coda on dirty modernism’s plastic futures.

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Frost delivered American poetry into the 20th century. Modernism. A poet, novelist, and critic, American Gertrude Stein lived much of her life in Paris at the center of a thriving literary and artistic community. Stein coined the phrase “Lost Generation” to describe the disillusioned American expatriate writers living in Paris. Other modernist poets focused even more intently on experimentation with language and form. Some of their work was quite playful and some of it showed the influence of dada and surrealism—European movements that undermined and mocked the value and traditions of art. In The Ecology of Modernism, Joshua Schuster examines the relationships of key modernist writers, poets, and musicians to nature, industrial development, a. He posits that the curious failure of modernist poets to develop an environmental ethic was a deliberate choice and not an inadvertent omission. In his opening passage, Schuster boldly invokes lines from Walt Whitman’s Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” which echo as a paean to pollution: Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall!” Schuster labels this theme regeneration through pollution” and demonstrates how this motif recurs in modernist compositions.