Introduction: Places of Rest

In the first place the world is unrestful.
—E. M. Forster, “Modern Writing”

Surveying the state of literature in the 1930s, E. M. Forster is nostalgic for the relative peace of the Edwardian England of his youth. He paints a picture of the modern world as one without rest, fixity, or security. This characterization of modernity is a common one. Always on the move, ever-expanding, always innovating, the modernist knows no bounds. Forster admits that restlessness gives the modern era its identity, but he frankly finds such a world exhausting. While this assessment shows his personal bias—not to mention his age—he is not alone in calling attention to a growing sense that civilization, and the British Empire in particular, had outrun its resources. In a world suffering spiritually and materially, human action seems increasingly futile. And yet, something must be done. The unrestful world demands attention, forcing its bewildered inhabitants to consider a whole host of factors economic, environmental, and social. The “modern writing” that Forster details found both wild innovation and profound doubt amidst these enervating conditions. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is most iconic of this dual position: shoring fragments while questioning the poet’s ability to reassemble an organic whole. His famously ambivalent question, “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” shows nostalgia for what is lost while considering the possibility for future recovery and regeneration.¹

Even though it drove him to mental and physical collapse, Eliot did not simply abandon his long poem. He took a rest, and then he finished it. And while he perhaps expected no answer to his question about putting lands in order, British ecologists and environmental activists did take the possibility of regeneration quite literally through efforts to protect significant areas of the United Kingdom between 1912, with the formation of the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves, and 1949, with the establishment of the

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Nature Conservancy. What began as an avant-garde pursuit met with repeated setbacks during WWI and the interwar period. Yet the early efforts of these self-fashioned “modern” environmentalists provided the framework for a national movement that would firmly resonate during WWII and proliferate throughout Great Britain in the postwar era. The case for protecting nature required new linguistic and imaginative registers in order to communicate the cultural importance of the natural world. While environmentalists largely began with economic registers, citing the “value” of putting nature in “trust” for future generations, it was not until they moved towards a rhetoric of nature as a place of rest, recovery, and regeneration for an exhausted society suffering from the ravages of war that protection efforts found support from a wider public.

Making this shift intelligible, this book argues, required not only new modes of science and activism, but also the work of poets, novelists, and artists to critique the exhausting and exploitative conditions of modern life. While scholars have long cited the influence of Romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Shelley on early British environmentalism, the work of modernist writers to challenge the rampant anthropocentrism of the first half of the twentieth century has only recently attracted critical attention. Modernism is too often synonymous with an autonomous or insular “art for art’s sake.” A world to itself, the modernist text has little need for “nature” or the external realities of the physical world. Although modernists avoided an idealized nature, they were deeply invested in analyzing life in terms of environment, milieu, ambience, and atmosphere. I read the formal innovations of modernist writers as an aesthetic strategy for registering the body’s response to rapid changes occurring in its local and distant surroundings. Representations of human fragility and resilience amidst exhausted ecosystems challenged problematic industrial and imperial discourses of unlimited progress. Innovative narrative techniques that present immediacy and introspection provide an early register of what Rob Nixon has termed the “slow violence” of ecological degradation. Read ecocritically, modernist literature presents a shift from viewing humans as transcendent and autonomous masters of nature to susceptible, immersed, and engaged with their environments. T. S. Eliot’s iconic fragmentation of psyches and landscapes in The Waste Land, D. H. Lawrence’s presentation of the effects of industrialization on rural England in The Rainbow, James Joyce’s overlapping atmospheres in the urban milieu of Ulysses, Djuna Barnes’s creatural life in Nightwood, Jean Rhys’s blending of mental spaces and built environments in Good Morning, Midnight, the work of modernist writers in the early twentieth century was not so much to spread a spirit of...
Introduction: Places of Rest

respect for nature, but to interrogate identity and community in relation to unsustainable exploitation.

I highlight ecological thought among modernist writers in order to evaluate a range of cultural attitudes towards environment in the early twentieth century. This is a period ecocritics have largely shunned for its wanton environmental disregard. Iconic studies of modernism such as Marshall Berman’s All that Is Solid Melts into Air, Stephen Kern’s The Culture of Time and Space, Fredric Jameson’s A Singular Modernity, Andrew Thacker’s Moving through Modernity, and Enda Duffy’s The Speed Handbook have focused on modernization as a cultural force pitted against the natural world. Technological modernity coupled with imperialist expansion set out to control and perfect the environment, leading to the loss of organic identity, the rise of abstract space, movement, velocity, acceleration, and the fragmentation of experience. I approach these familiar tropes with an opposite attention to “rest” and “place” in order to analyze humanity’s material engagement with the surrounding world in terms of resource consumption and power dynamics. The notion that “nothing is at rest” is a defining tenet of modernity going back to the Copernican revolution; however, a crisis of restlessness leading up to and following WWI signaled a growing awareness of western culture’s exhaustive exploitation of a thoroughly inhabited world. Drawing on histories of environmentalism and philosophies of environmental aesthetics from scholars such as Allen Carlson, Timothy Morton, Peter Sloterdijk, and Ursula Heise, I analyze representations of rest and recovery in literature in light of changing attitudes towards humanity’s relation to land itself: considering, in particular, the rise of nature reserves as places of regeneration for flora, fauna, and humans alike. Yet the nature reserve embodied only one of many environmentalist causes. The formation of societies concerned with such disparate phenomena as the health risks of air pollution, massive fish die-offs in fouled rivers, the rehabilitation of open-cast mines, and urbanism’s influence on social behavior, all point to a culture increasingly concerned with environmental conditions.

Given the fast-paced energy of modern life, a little rest might seem to be a welcome escape, a moment free of obligations. Indeed, the modern leisure industry is precisely in the business of selling rest as a place where one can avoid thinking about the stresses of living. I set out in this book to recuperate rest not as inactivity but as a vigorous and lively attack on exhaustion. Linking the physiological and psychological act of resting to the environmental conditions of its production, rest becomes a way to think about place, and in particular the labor and material resources that
allow humans to sustain their place in the world. Considered in its larger environmental and cultural conditions, rest becomes not an individual escape from the world but a form of *ecological immersion* that reveals the organic limits of all living beings. I pursue notions of regeneration through a number of different “texts” literary, scientific, political, and material. To consider an area of land a text might seem strange, but the different economic and political investments that sustain any area of land reveal a narrative of competing interests. Property lines bound the nature reserve, creating a zone of bodily immersion that provides a vital space for imaginative and emotional transport. A printed text can also be a place of rest, one which fixes a reader’s attention within its binding, but also leads the mind in any number of directions. The authors in this study privilege a cosmopolitan notion of rest as an ability to transcend modernization’s obsession with productivity in order to engage with other people and nonhuman forms of life. Regeneration, in this sense, is recognition of other life not as mere environment or surroundings but as a vital system of interconnection. Unfortunately, such a rosy picture of care is often only visible through its negation, and many of the texts analyzed in this book provide pessimistic views of ecology as a system of unequal power relations where certain species as well as human communities flourish at the expense of others. With this in mind, I consider the limits of modernist regeneration: the moments where aesthetic innovation confronts cultural and material exhaustion.

**A Tale of Two Fields**

“Modernization” and “industrial modernity” continue to play the chief antagonists in ecocritical studies while modernism remains one of the least studied artistic periods from an ecocritical perspective. Although studies of modernism and the environment are not as numerous as those on environment in contemporary literature or romanticism, for example, this is rapidly changing. Recent years have seen a boom in ecocritical studies of modernism on a number of exciting and disparate topics. Bonnie Scott Kime’s *In the Hollow of the Wave* presents a wide-ranging survey of modernist “uses” of nature before focusing on Virginia Woolf’s encounters with natural history, gardens, landscapes, animals, and ecological holism. Woolf, indeed, stands out as the one modernist writer who has received substantial ecocritical attention. Christina Alt’s *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* offers a thorough account of Woolf’s relation to the natural sciences, stressing the transition from the sterile Victorian era practice of
species collection to the more vibrant sciences of ecology and etiology in the early twentieth century. While I do not engage extensively with Woolf’s fiction in this book—in part because much excellent work has been done already—her voice is present throughout the chapters, acting not unlike Dante’s Virgil, guiding the reader through the different rings of early twentieth-century environmental hell.

More recent books such as Kelly Sultzbach’s Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination, Joshua Schuster’s The Ecology of Modernism, Jeffrey McCarthey’s Green Modernism, and Rebecca Walsh’s The Geopoetics of Modernism all provide strong interpretations of modernism through different ecocritical approaches. Despite the similarity of titles, each critic outlines a different version of modernism (American vs. British, fiction vs. poetry), alongside different versions of ecocritical thought (new materialism, eco-poetics, animal studies, etc.). Sultzbach looks at the presence of the nonhuman in her study, while making important gestures towards urbanism, race, imperialism, and class in the writings of Forster, Woolf, and Auden. Schuster directly takes on questions of pollution, noise, traffic, and contamination that make the period such an environmental bête noire. Walsh traces scientific and cultural discourses of environmental determinism in popular texts such as National Geographic, making important connections to colonial projects of population management.

Despite the flourishing of ecocritical studies of modernism, there remains a large amount of uncertainty over what this union ultimately produces. McCarthey’s work convincingly makes the case that environmental readings can further critical projects to embed modernist studies in a richer field of material relationships. Conversely, modernism can push ecocriticism beyond its origins in nature writing to disrupt the active-passive binary between a human observer and “natural” objects of observation. Yet McCarthey often invokes an unclear and uncritical notion of “nature” in establishing a rhetoric of “green” texts that are able to navigate complicated responses to modernity and work towards social change. His “green modernism” relies on Object Oriented Ontology and New Materialist theory to do the heavy lifting of giving nature agency beyond human epistemologies and to layer through the nuances of bodily integration with environment. It’s worth pointing out that these contemporary modes of philosophical thought have their antecedents in the early twentieth century as well. While he did not go so far as to ponder the ontology of rocks, Jakob von Uexküll’s theory of Umwelt was precisely an attempt to articulate the different worlds inhabited by other living creatures that humans have no access to. Arthur George Tansley’s new discipline of
ecology took the vital connectedness of the material world as its baseline. While these scientific approaches reinvigorated human ideas about nature at a time when the Darwinian dogma of environmental determinism was wearing thin, they also found odd bedfellows with imperialist and fascist agendas. Tansley’s ecology was put to work throughout the British Empire while Nazism and other fascist regimes rose to power by casting different human worldviews as alien and inferior.

The close proximity between anthrodecentrism and the exploitation of less powerful human cultures should give pause. The issues that arise when new materialists lump together humanity as a species are only enforced by tone-deaf and insensitive environmentalist movements that have historically privileged one culture’s idea of nature over another’s. Here, as Sultzbach points out, modernism is well-positioned to interrogate what “environmentalism” actually entails. While her work outlines a rich ecocritical discussion on the nuances of contemporary understandings of dynamic living systems, she neglects to go into detail about early twentieth-century discussions of “environmentalism” that played out among a wide range of environmentalist groups and activists. What makes groups such as The Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves, the Smoke Abatement League of Great Britain, the Council for the Protection of Rural England, the Pure Rivers Society, and others such a fascinating object of study is precisely the rhetorical development that took place as people struggled to articulate what environmentalism could offer to the modern world. In this book, I go beyond the historical fact of modern environmentalism to critique the language that animated these dialogues. Moreover, I draw on archival materials that detail the laborious process of advocating on behalf of the natural world to consider questions of class, property, and power. Early twentieth-century environmentalism, in my analysis, is not a nostalgic or backwards-looking reaction against modernity, but rather itself a thoroughly modernist response to increasingly unsustainable forms of modernization.

Most of these recent books on ecocritical modernism take a survey approach to the subject, partly to pay tribute to the incredible diversity of material on offer in the early twentieth century and partly to avoid new totalizing narratives about a period fraught with overdetermination. The present book also surveys a variety of authors while at the same time pursuing a more narrative approach for the years 1910–1960. I trace the historical development of environmentalism in the United Kingdom because it is a compelling case study in resilience and reinvention despite many setbacks. But there is also a growing sense that time is reasserting
itself through environmental change in all sorts of new ways. Questions of temporality that have always been at the heart of modernism find new relevance in a contemporary era obsessed with tracking CO\textsubscript{2} emission levels one year to the next and speculating on what the future will bring. As a technologically-driven global society grows increasingly precarious, the time seems right to take a step back and consider an environmental modernity that arose out of industrial and imperial Europe and remains influential in our current neoliberal moment.

The result, paradoxically, is not to provide a new narrative on modernism as a definite period, \textit{per se}. Rather than a divide where modernism is associated with the metropolis and excludes nature, modernism is more productively thought of as arising in relation to the forces of modernization that fuel metropolitan growth through the domination of natural resources and labor. This vision of modernism, rather than remaining coupled to an arbitrary range of years, can extend to other times and places, such as the 1950s Nigeria of Chinua Achebe’s \textit{No Longer at Ease}. Modernism, in the texts I read, becomes not simply the autonomous new for aesthetic purposes but a newness that takes account of its creative energy and dissipative afterlife. Rather than a simple faith in limitless renewal and reinvention, then, the modernism I have in mind is precisely one that is hyper aware of the limits of regeneration, poised to make a break or shift before the moment of complete exhaustion.

This focus on afterlives and material persistence can be illustrated by the arrival of “exhaust” itself as the quintessential yet elusive object of industrial modernity. While the act of exhausting something can be traced back to Shakespearean days—where to exhaust might have meant to move, carry away, to drink, to suck, or to use up completely—“exhaust” as a noun appears only in the nineteenth century in relation to the byproduct released by steam engines.\textsuperscript{4} At this moment, exhaust becomes both a problem to be solved through engineering maximum efficiency as well as an actual physical presence in the world. Exhaust—as remainder and reminder—qualifies Jürgen Habermas’s “modernity as an unfinished project” in terms of the resources that continue to perpetuate the modernist ethos as well as the leftovers of past production. This focus on the consumption of energy drives Teresa Brennan’s prescient philosophy in \textit{Exhausting Modernity}, where she outlines the modern world as pitted against nature and sustainability: one that exhausts material resources as well as the human bodies and psyches of its constituents. While she perhaps underestimates capitalism’s interest in monetizing sustainable regeneration, her work makes crucial connections between human physiology, affect, and the natural...
world. Against modern subjects who believe themselves to be “energetically separate” from both their human and nonhuman surroundings, Brennan outlines a world where humans are “squeezed into an alignment with nature” by a capitalist order that views both in terms of energy content. Brennan’s theory has similarities with new materialisms, yet her focus on energy and energetic transfer or replacement provides a crucial link to labor that can also call into consideration the labor of writing and activism.

Brennan’s attention to an interconnected biosphere of energetic production is an extension of older materialist theories of the work of art’s interpellation in an aggressively changing world. Fredric Jameson’s A Singular Modernity makes the assertion that “artistic or aesthetic ‘modernism’ essentially corresponds to a situation of incomplete modernization.” In this formulation, rural and urban realms may be distinct yet interlinked through technology and infrastructure. Both art and technology are faced with the impulse towards originality and the new, often through a dynamic “break” with the past. This break may also be thought of in terms of exhaustion, whether necessary or willed. The actual exhaustion of a natural resource requires a rapid switch to some new fuel (from coal to natural gas), just as an aesthetic exhaustion of forms, values, and interests leads the artist to seek out new modes of expression. Yet this reinvention does not occur out of whole cloth or thin air. I suggest thinking of these waves of the new as regeneration—not in the sense of restoring the past, but merely as a reminder that what is new, no matter how extreme, always draws on existing energy. Modernism then can be thought of as a strategic form of regeneration where absolute exhaustion is constantly avoided through aesthetic innovation. While certain practitioners may pursue a particular vision of modernism to the point of obsolescence, what becomes most highly valued is to sense the limits of formerly “modern” deployments and to break, pivot, and point the way towards new modes of generation. Here an ecological component may enter into this characterization of modernity. Both Brennan and Jameson point to sources of energy. Jameson identifies Heidegger’s discussion of “standing reserve” as crucial to providing the resources for modern emergence. The stockpile becomes a way of avoiding collapse, however, it also perpetuates a particular form of modernity that through its repetitions may lead to cultural exhaustion. The United Kingdom’s reliance on coal is a particularly striking example. The nature reserve also contains the logic of standing reserve, especially when looked at through the utilitarian lens of modern forestry practices. Instead of an inert mass of material, the nature reserve promises a living, dynamic system of replenishment. Yet the nature
reserve also has its cultural component, influencing individuals who frequent its spaces. Nature protection, then, may be thought of as a response to modernization as well as a flawed modernist yearning towards utopian stability complete with its own issues of labor, ownership, and capitalist control.

While there are numerous environmental movements in the early twentieth century, I emphasize a specific strand of British environmentalism—and the efforts of the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (SPNR) in particular—as a modernist practice relying on the science of ecology and the apparatuses of state control and legal frameworks. The SPNR was unique for eschewing a single species focus, taking on the more ambitious task of protecting entire ecosystems. In adopting such a wide focus, however, the society had difficulty communicating the cultural importance of their mission. The UK also presents unique spatial challenges. While other nations were able to draw on vast wilderness areas in order to establish nature reserves (although not without often displacing indigenous communities), the United Kingdom’s territory was limited and largely developed. At the same time, the extensive imperial holdings of the British Empire brought a large portion of the world’s resources under British control. That the preservation and stewardship of “pristine” tracts of British nature was often materially tied to colonial exploitation emphasizes the highly ambivalent nature of British environmentalism in terms of class privilege, imperial power, and public access. In addition, the upheaval of the Great War and the ensuing economic depression of the interwar period proved to be major setbacks for environmental legislation and protection efforts. It was not until WWII and the inward turns of postwar reconstruction and decolonization that environmental movements found a firm foothold within the United Kingdom. Yet in its failures, half-measures, colonialist contradictions, and belated trajectory towards national acceptance, British environmentalism remains significant, precisely because activists confronted a linguistic struggle to articulate a more beneficial relationship between humanity and the environment. The British case in the early twentieth century continues to resonate in contemporary environmental discourse, where interests in climate change and the Anthropocene invite humanists to see the global condition as that of a shrinking and sinking island, saddled with the weight of environmental neglect and discontent.

As the fields of ecocriticism and modernist studies come together, the challenge remains to produce work that advances both fields and doesn’t simply reinterpret one through the other’s lens. A “green modernism” that
doesn’t challenge the basic critical frameworks of modernist studies misses out on the productive thorniness of environmental ideologies. Similarly, importing modernist aesthetics to ecocriticism misses out on the more energizing political investments of modernist writers. In this book, I try to cross-pollinate both fields. I consider how certain ecologists and environmentalists presented their own interests as modern and revolutionary. At the same time, I show how environmental critiques in modernist literature can lead to a regenerative aesthetic that is dynamic and does not simply seek to restore a past order or preserve existing structures. Ecocritical literary scholars continue to push for interdisciplinary approaches to literature, but few actually engage fully with cultural histories of science and environmental activism. On the other hand, works from historians of science and environment often approach the subject in an overly descriptive, empirical fashion. Exhausted Ecologies operates in the middle ground of cultural studies to explore imaginative and psychological themes in a variety of literary, scientific, and political texts.

Land as Text

What the efforts of ecology and literature share in common during the early twentieth century is an exploration of “life itself,” with all the ambitious grandeur that such a vague term implies. For the new school of ecology—led by Arthur George Tansley—this began with the study of plants, but importantly extended beyond botany to consider life as a complicated and entangled process. In an early “Lecture on Ecology” delivered at the Hampstead Scientific Society on May 1, 1914, Tansley articulates the nascent field as above all consisting in a “point of view”:

a way of regarding plants not as things to be collected and identified . . . but as things to be studied for their own sakes, as living beings in the surroundings they naturally occupy . . . struggling with the vicissitudes of life, with inorganic nature or with one another under varying conditions and with varying degrees of success, increasing and multiplying and suppressing their competition, or gradually giving place to others better equipped in the struggle for life. It is just this point of view—this study of plants for their own sake in their vital relation to life which is the essence of Ecology. 8

Ecology, in Tansley’s formulation, emerges in revolt to the cold, clinical gaze of the natural sciences, which dominated the nineteenth century, to provide a new vantage from which to read the natural world. It is also