Animal and Social Ecologies in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*

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IN Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847), the eponymous narrator uses a range of ecological metaphors to make sense of her interactions with others. She likens governessing to domestic horticulture and envisions how her task of educating children will be "to train the tender plants, and watch their buds unfolding day by day."[1] Rather than voice her unfulfilled romantic feelings for Weston or consciously work through her self-doubts about physical appearance, she visualizes them both as insects: she is the "humble glow-worm" who, without a "power of giving light" (i.e., beauty), "the roving fly might pass her . . . a thousand times, and never light beside her" (123). Even the reader, in the opening sentence, assumes the role of active participant: a nucivorous beast hunting for whatever "dry, shriveled kernel" of narrative meaning might be found by "cracking the nut" (5). As character, the budding naturalist "botanize[s] and entomologize[s] along the green banks and budding hedges"; as narrator, she projects herself and those around her into complex ecosystems (95). Her choice of metaphors captures a matrix of exchanges in which species of all kinds interact with one another and their environments in unpredictable ways.[2] Agnes assigns the life cycles of flora and fauna to characters, populating the novel with human and nonhuman animals in ways that draw heavily on early nineteenth-century science even as they also prefigure some of the concerns of contemporary animal studies and ecocriticism.[3]

The limited scholarship that exists on *Agnes Grey* recognizes the links between humans and animals that pervade the text.[4] To date, however, scholars have focused on two types of evidence: rhetorical similarities between characters and animals (John Murray is "as rough as a young bear") and the treatment of animals by human actors (contrasting, for example, Weston's gentleness to a dog with Hatfield's abuse of the

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same canine) (60). In their analyses, morally good characters like Agnes, those who "feel another creature's pain," are socioeconomically undermined by those who, like her employers, exhibit predatory behavior and impose physical/fiscal authority over human and nonhuman organisms alike.[5] As Maggie Berg argues, a "representation of animals . . . as exploited and abused—is indistinguishable from . . . the objectification and exploitation of women" and the lower classes.[6] For these critics, the abjection of animals works intersectionally, through cross-species analogies, materializing the oppression of women and the lower classes in ways that would not otherwise be possible. This central thesis accurately claims that the novel uses animal imagery to make larger arguments about class and gender relations—and attends well to selected scenes in which marginalized subjects, human and animal, are rendered abject. Yet Berg and other scholars overlook the substantial evidence in the novel of unstable and contingent relations among human and nonhuman species. Their interpretations assign all organisms to static ranks in an immutable hierarchy: a heated claim in the heady class politics of the 1840s. Moreover, in their focus on the text's representational use of animals or human treatment of animals, such readings resurrect the rigid divisions inherited from liberal humanism. Nonhuman animals in their analyses function as figurative substitutes for oppressed people rather than participants in the ecosystem in their own right—organisms that may not be subject to humans.[7] Indeed, aside from mention of early animal rights activism, existing scholarship on *Agnes Grey* has paid little attention either to more recent work in ecocriticism and animal studies or to vital nineteenth-century shifts in ecological thought.[8]

This essay revisits species relations in Brontë's novel, drawing on early Victorian scientific discourse to argue that the entangled and weblike form of the ecosystem offers a more valuable framework to analyze its complexities of human-animal interactions and economic structures. As Gillian Beer has noted, and as is explained more in the following section, the metaphor of the web circulated widely in the decades before Charles Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, making his use of the term striking not for its novelty but for its exemplarity. In her analysis of the concept, Beer has stressed how "the web is a different shape from the chain." "The web is not a hierarchical model," she writes; "it can express horizontality and extension, but it does not fix places, as on the rungs of a ladder."[9] Instead of "pure onward procedure," or what Darwin rejects as "a single file," the web is "ramified and diversified," even "devious."[10] Beer's word "devious," which she applies broadly to the term and not to any specific ecosystem, connotes both

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deviation—the unpredictable patterns created by the bonds of a web—and deviancy, or the potential for subversive or radical effects.

The "deviousness" of the ecological web in *Agnes Grey* works first to destabilize predator-prey relationships and then to challenge existing hierarchical structures of class and species. Across Brontë's novel, animal-human links do more than shore up existing natural or social structures of dominance—or provide the basis for a straightforward critique of them. Instead, species relations give form to ambiguous and shifting forms of interaction and power-play that would suggest an alternative understanding of the early Victorian economic sphere. Unstable, "devious" ecosystems are not synonymous with volatile economic systems, and yet an *eco*logical register can also be salient for an *eco*nomic critique. In Jason Moore's concept of "world-ecology," an imbroglio of economic structures, social behaviors, and so-called nature, the idea of humans-in-nature is "dialectical" and "holistic": characterized not by the interaction of "two basic, impenetrable units" but by a coupling and intertwining.[11] The vocabulary Moore adopts, of the ecosystem or web, implies a negation of discrete units and hierarchies in favor of rhizomatic and relational forms.[12]

Methodologically, this refusal to fix places illuminates the novel's take on 1840s England: a famously tendentious era, especially in the north, rife with Chartist petitions and riots (1839 and 1842), economic depression, the banking crisis of 1847, and the mid-decade railway investment mania. In its explicit content, *Agnes Grey* is almost entirely apolitical—although the protagonist's father's luckless speculation resembles that of many other investors in the same decade—but its rebuttal of crude, entrenched hierarchies is itself a direct response to the economic situation of the era. The ecological scheme of the novel is not a direct reflection of external realities but a prismatic one—one that can, in its weblike metaphors, take account of a complex economic reality, with players of varying classes, that witness financial loss as well as gain. The ecological lens that this novel provides does not assign species relations to specific actors or events but rather shapes an intricate critique: not what scholars have read as a direct condemnation of the "aristocratic side of the conflict" but rather a nuanced appraisal of entangled forms of economic exploitation and class conflict.[13]

1. Early Victorian "Ecology"

Although the related terms "ecological" and "ecosystem" did not exist in 1847, the concept was already in circulation in the early Victorian

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period.[14] *Agnes Grey* invokes an idea of relationality that lies chronologically after a Romantic balance of nature, before Charles Darwin's 1859 claim that "plants and animals, most remote in the scale of nature, are bound together by a web of complex relations,"[15] and directly amidst ongoing debates about the relation of an organism to its immediate environment—a connection that was increasingly represented as weblike.

As scholars like Alan Bewell and Heidi C. M. Scott have argued, the Romantic paradigm of nature was "fundamentally balanced, nurturing, and intelligible,"[16] abstracted into "notions of naturalness, harmony, and organic form."[17] William Wordsworth, whom John Parham typifies as "fundamentally pre-ecological,"[18] uses the word "harmony" five times in his *Guide to the Lakes*, a tract available to Brontë.[19] In his loving depiction of the Lake District, "a pleasing harmony" reconciles the "humble works of man" with the natural environment, in "a harmony of tone and colour, a consummation and perfection of beauty."[20] Brontë was well versed in Wordsworth's writing and the ideal of congruous nature, and her early poetry often illustrates a sympathy between human and countryside: from "The North Wind," written in January 1838, "That wind is from the North I know it well . . . I know its language; thus it speaks to me."[21] The natural force, the landscape, the calendar month, and the speaker are in synchrony. Even in her poem "Memory," included in the sisters' 1846 *Poems*, Wordsworth's presence remains strongly felt: "Sweet memory ever smile on me; / Nature's chief beauties spring from thee; / O still thy tribute bring."[22] Yet, as signaled in the first paragraph, *Agnes Grey* does not suggest an idealized, congruent nature but a version that had a particular midcentury valence: a nature imperfect and prone to disruption. Ecosystems can be hostile, with "uncongenial soil," and they do not necessarily facilitate productive relations between organisms (54). Humans set traps to catch so-called rodents, and domesticated canines kill rabbits in what Matilda Murray calls a "noble chase" (136). In short, *Agnes Grey* depicts ecosystems that are unstable, relational, and often shaped by erratic human behavior. It embodies shifting nineteenth-century understandings of the uneven relations among species.

The emergent focus on relationality shifted scientific discourse away from assessments of symbiosis toward "the reconciliation of balance and conflict"[23]—and, in its simultaneous attention to the individual and the group, prompted a shift toward what might be called a metaphorics of the web. Imagery of the mesh pervades much of early Victorian writing, across disciplines, from the "web of mutual relation and harmonious agreement" in John Herschel's 1833 account of the astronomical system

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(popularized in the widely read *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* [1844])[24] to the natural laws, "much intermixed and entangled . . . in a web composed of distinct threads" in John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic* (1843).[25] In the context of species relations, the imagery appears clearly in Robert Chambers's originally anonymous and controversial *Vestiges*, which encapsulated pre-*Origin* debates about evolution. As Chambers articulates, the gradation from the simplest to the most complex organism does not pass "along one line, on which every form of life can be, as it were, strung." Instead, "there may be branching or double lines . . . or the whole may be in a circle composed of minor circles."[26] Without using the word directly, Chambers invokes the ecosystem or the web: the warp and weft of lines that cross and bind together. When "all the various organic forms of the world are bound up in one" whole, complete individuation of any given organism—or "a separate exertion for each"—is, for Chambers, "totally inadmissible."[27]

In its evocation of a weblike ecosystem, *Vestiges* also more widely disseminated an existing turn in Chambers's position on transmutation and brought increased attention to ongoing debates about a species' relationship to its larger environment. Although the author's *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* had rejected Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's controversial model of transmutation throughout the 1830s, espousing instead Charles Lyell's theory of immutable traits, an April 1842 essay on "The Educability of Animals" had first suggested the writer's shift in opinion, acknowledging that "even the lower animals are capable of being improved, through a succession of generations, by the constant presence of a meliorating agency."[28] In conceding the potential for adaptation based on environmental factors, the earlier essay set up the proto-ecological argument in *Vestiges*, which in turn injected new venom into clashes between the Lyellian and Lamarckian renderings of natural history—an intellectual contest to which Brontë would have been exposed not only through the anonymous work (and reviews of it) but also through her wider reading in the Keighley Mechanics' Institute Library, which her father joined in 1833.[29]

The divergence between Lyellian and Lamarckian paradigms marked, respectively, either a rejection or an acceptance of evolutionary change based on species relations. In *Principles of Geology* (1830–33), Lyell situated his argument for uniformitarianism (or the persistence of natural laws) alongside a belief that, "in the universal struggle for existence, the right of the strongest eventually prevails."[30] If, as he theorized, a species' general traits are immutable, meaning that they would not alter over

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generations, then, in any environment, it was the "more vigorous individuals" of a kind that would survive and pass on their traits.[31] Although the claim might seem to prefigure Darwin's later theory of the "survival of the fittest," it works specifically to refute beliefs in adaptation: any given species does not, in Lyell's view, evolve to become more vigorous. Rather, as James Secord explains, in his effort to preserve "the special status of humanity" and to ward off "clerical attacks on his advocacy of the uniformity of nature . . . which could lead to suspicions that the groundwork was being laid for a naturalistic explanation of species," Lyell insisted on unchanging structures of dominance.[32] In making such claims, the geologist refuted the theory of transmutation put forward by Lamarck two decades earlier—and, ironically, promulgated ideas that were not translated into English until the twentieth century.[33] Lamarck advocated an early theory of "soft inheritance": any traits acquired by an organism during its lifetime, through adaptation to its environment, could be passed down through reproduction to offspring. "Every new need," Lamarck wrote, "requires the animal, either to make more frequent use of some of its parts which it previously used less, and thus greatly to develop and enlarge them; or else to make use of entirely new parts, to which the needs have imperceptibly given birth."[34] These "acquired modifications," according to the theory of transmutation, are "preserved by reproduction . . . and finally give rise to a race quite distinct" from that of the parent organisms.[35] Change, in this latter theory, exists both in the present—in differentiations among members of a species—and in the projected future, in the potential for more dramatic shifts in species relations. Lamarck's theory, as Devin Griffiths has suggested, also conjures the web yet again: in its "examination of the relations between specific elements, rather than . . . the blinkered investigation of individual species."[36]

The debates over transmutation, and between Lyell's and Lamarck's theories, capture crucial tensions in 1840s scientific thought—and in the nascent language of the web (or ecosystem), in which species relations rested between stability and incessant variation. In other words, as Scott suggests, if the "classic ecological paradigm . . . depicts a character that is fundamentally balanced, nurturing, and intelligible," whereas "postmodern ecology depicts nature as inherently chaotic, stochastic, and subject to catastrophic change," then early Victorian concepts of nature occupied a place between the two models.[37] *Agnes Grey* sits squarely within this transitional moment, despite its exclusion from recent work in Victorian ecocriticism. Brontë's novel uses scientific discourse on species

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relations to invite reconceptualizations of power structures and class politics not as permanent forms "in balance" but as complex and enmeshed. The representation of entanglement is both an altered map of species relations and also a sharp critique of an economic system that implicates both the human and the nonhuman in its logic of contention.

2. The Bloomfield Ecosystem

In its relatively brief depiction of the Bloomfield household, *Agnes Grey* juxtaposes the Lyellian and Lamarckian theories of ecological relations. Either physical dominance ensures survival of the strongest individual (and its offspring or species), or the transmutation of an organism facilitates its endurance. The former privileges corporeal authority (or financial superiority) as it exists in a stable form; the latter admits the possibility of diachronic fluidity and potential rupture, wherein an adapted organism or emergent species might gain ascendancy. In a given system, the distinction between the two theories is also based in time: dominance in the present versus the prospect of change after an unspecified period. The arguments are irreconcilable, and yet, together, they capture the transitional period within which *Agnes Grey* is situated: both the unstable economic period of the 1840s and a scientific era in which species are poised between stability and inexorable change—a period in which violence can be at once a predictable show of dominance and a precursor to unpredictable disruptions in the social order.

The novel immediately codes the Bloomfield house as a hostile ecosystem for Agnes. Its "bitter wind" is uncomfortably cold, as are its "strange inhabitants," and her clothes are ill-suited for the residence, which she cannot navigate without assistance (16–17). Its own denizens, however, seem suited to their environment: Mrs. Bloomfield's "chilly" manner, "cold grey eyes," and "cool, immutable gravity" are repetitive echoes of the climate, and the children happily play "bootless" in the snow (16–17, 34). To Agnes, the Bloomfields are foreign and discomforting, yet they are well adjusted to their milieu and recognized by society, including by the protagonist's aunt—whose assessment of the mother as a "very nice woman" is given twice (13, 46). The scientific explanation for the ill-fit between the environment and its newest inhabitant is not immediately made clear. Is Agnes too weak, bodily and socially, to compete in a system structured around performances of dominance, or does her struggle to assimilate point to muddled processes of adaptation? This section argues that the answer is both, or perhaps neither: in its critique of

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existing forms of authority and its representation of forward-looking contingency, the narrative of the Bloomfield system unmoors Agnes and those in the family from expected forms of social identification.

The novel implies that, in their social sphere or "ecosystem," the Bloomfields have been successful not despite but because of the physical authority they extend unequivocally over nonhuman and human species. In Lyellian terms, they are the "strongest," most vigorous specimens. Displays of corporeal dominance are repeatedly conflated with economic or social success. Mary Ann wields her body weight as a strategy for repelling Agnes's lessons. Tom uses whips and spurs on his rocking-horse and then threatens to strike his sister, coding what might seem like childhood play as a genuine display of masculine authority. As he becomes acquainted with his new governess, he extends his domain from the playroom to geographic territory (the flower beds that are "his," from which he plucks buds and presents them to Agnes "as one conferring a prodigious favour") and finally to the trapped animals on which he likes to experiment (20). The rhetoric and practice of physical prowess link the abuse of animals to superiority over a lower-class employee and, however implicitly, to colonial authority. Tom's behavior manifests Harriet Ritvo's claim that talking about their superiority to animals offered Victorians a general way to "avow a project of domination."[38] His abuse of animals (and women) also, pointedly, mimics that of his father and maternal uncle, suggesting that he will inherit socioeconomic success from both sides of the family. Mr. Bloomfield abrades his wife with knife in hand, threatens to horsewhip his children, and exhibits carnivorous disrespect for the animal kingdom when he longs to have more "nice, red, gravy" from his meat (24). His physical dominance seems to echo his social ascendancy (i.e., his ability to retire at a young age), even if it also marks a certain immorality. Whether or not readers are "justified in suspecting domestic violence," as Berg claims, referring to the suggestive links Lisa Surridge makes between animal abuse and wife battering, readers must recognize the insistent conflation of physical "vigor" and economic success in this part of the text.[39]

In this Lyellian interpretation of the Bloomfield ecosystem, whips and animal traps work alongside bank accounts and claims of ownership to maintain entrenched structures of power. That is to say, in what would have been recognizable to anyone who read news of strike-breaks in the 1840s, physical and social authority are grounded in present-tense displays of dominance: who has the most money, the heavier bodily frame, the louder voice, the capacity to injure or kill a lesser being.[40]

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Agnes lacks authority not only because of her limited earning potential (her annual salary is twenty-five pounds) but also because of her diminutive stature, reserved demeanor, kindness, and limited possessions: in a telling paragraph, one of the first things we learn about her family is that it has sold "the stout well-fed pony—the old favorite that we had fully determined should end its days in peace, and never pass from our hands" and given notice to all but one of its servants (9). She is not, it seems, "fit" to survive in this harsh environment—and her eventual dismissal might be read in this light, as explained further below. Yet if an ecosystem based in synchronic physical and fiscal authority sustains some form of balance, albeit one based in predatory behavior, it is also, at least in this novel, susceptible to rupture—and especially to the fluctuations of chronological change.

In a scene that marks the beginning of her departure from the Bloomfield home, Agnes upends the structures of power through her own exercise of corporeal might. To forestall Tom's plans to torture a brood of five nestlings, she drops "a large flat stone" on his "intended victims, and crushed them flat beneath it" (43). Rather than leaving Tom to effect his "list of torments," she assumes the mantle of violence and kills the birds in one blow. As Ivan Kreilkamp notes, Agnes's use of a rock intended to be used by "the gardener as a mouse-trap suggests how thoroughly this society is suffused by violence to animals."[41] This ecosystem is broader than a single family—as readers might already suspect, based on the Bloomfields' success on a larger social scale. Crucially, however, Agnes commands power in this scene. "Urged by a sense of duty," the governess exhibits in this moment the physical vigor that she could not summon earlier: against expectations (the Bloomfields' and ours), she greets Tom's anger and Robson's stare "without flinching," and she nearly quarrels with Mrs. Bloomfield when the latter chastises her for weighing "the welfare of a soulless brute" above "a child's amusement" (43–44). Agnes's actions either gesture to an inner potential that has thus far been hidden or hint that she has indeed adapted to this environment—and they beckon, critically, to the persistence of contingency and change, even in an ecosystem that seems to be stable and immutable.

This scene recalls a truth often ignored by those critics of the novel who read for forms of oppression: that neither physical nor social authority is ever strictly hierarchical in the Bloomfield home. Power relations shift not only based on corporeal heft, age, or gender but also as a result of situational negotiations and adaptations. The young children vie for Agnes's attention, just as Mrs. Bloomfield and her mother-in-law

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compete for domestic supremacy. Mr. Bloomfield's subtle addiction to gin marks his weakness (and possibly his strategy for adapting to his circumstances), and spousal sparring diminishes the couple in the eyes of their servants. Betty the nurse disciplines her charges in the nursery with "a good whipping now and then," in a way that their parents never would, and is dismissed for her behavior (40). Just as Tom proclaims that he will use spurs and whip on his pony, he is also potentially the recipient of analogous violence: Agnes compares him to a "wild, unbroken colt," one on which a whip would certainly be used, and his father follows up with immediate threats of a horsewhipping (26, 35). Similarly, just as Robson displays mastery by kicking his dogs, Tom and Agnes reflect this vehemence onto others: Agnes "would have given a sovereign any day to see one of them bite him," and Tom "vow[s] he would make him kick" the governess (42–43). The characters can and do take on subject positions normally assigned to others: Mr. Bloomfield embodies Agnes's unexpressed threat of a horsewhipping, and Agnes and Tom vocalize the same desires for violence. What may have looked like a hierarchy could be more accurately described as an arena of shifting relations, in which characters—including the servants who discipline and the animals that bite—compete for control. Competition prompts behavioral modifications, and as characters adapt to family circumstances, the power dynamics shift.

Dominance, in other words, is at once essentialized (Tom has inherited his father's traits; human beings have authority over brutes, men over women, and employers over hired hands) and susceptible to change, dependent on the passing of time (albeit not on the scale of generational evolution), the shifting inhabitants of the environment, and the mutable behavior of human and nonhuman animals. What reads as a discourse on Lyellian and Lamarckian ecologies is also a case for a destabilizing of socioeconomic control: for an interim state between traditional forms of power and something that could come to resemble anarchy or incessant social adaptation (or, in a Yorkshire context, a successful workers' strike). The ecosystem of Agnes's first post is a model not only for what Susan Meyer has seen as a reversal "of the ruling class conceit that the lower classes are like beasts" but also for a rejection of any simplistically hierarchical or stable form.[42] Agnes's premature dismissal is at once a display of authority by the Bloomfields and a reminder of the capacity for flux in both an individual and the environment—of what, following Lamarck, we might call social transmutation.

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3. The Murray Ecosystem

From the opening pages of her time at Horton Lodge, Agnes represents herself as a nonnative species introduced into an ecosystem as replete with human and nonhuman organisms as that of the Bloomfields, if of different types. The Murray estate seems to be isolated from class upheavals, to embody what Scott depicts as a safe, proto-ecological "microcosm."[43] Its "wide park, stocked with deer," appears to be a "simple and closed system"[44] in which hunting-whips do not signify violence but mark residents as "devoted fox-hunter[s]" and "skillful horse-jockey[s]" (61, 55). Even the wild species that exist seem content with their situations, like the "graceful deer browsing on its moist herbage" (78). Readers might assume that the well-bred English family controls itself and its animals, either through husbandry, domestication, or coordinated hunting (the Murrays employ a gamekeeper). And, like the nonhuman species with which they are associated, the family largely upholds norms: for example, Rosalie weds the aristocrat whom she is expected to marry and returns from her honeymoon both with and like the well-trained French poodle.[45]

Yet from the opening pages of her time at Horton Lodge, Agnes depicts the ecosystem as both unfamiliar and relational—as something closer to Scott's "chaos." She begins by likening her arrival in the environment to that of a "thistle-seed borne on the wind to some strange nook of uncongenial soil" (54). As one among the ecometaphors referenced earlier, this line marks its speaker as an indigenous Yorkshire organism while it also renders the English estate uncanny. (In reality, the lodge is seventy miles from Agnes's family home, likely within the same county.)[46] Then, in the same (very long) sentence, she compares herself to a traveler who "awake[s] some morning and find[s] himself at Port Nelson in New Zealand, with a world of waters between himself and all that knew him" (54). Charlotte's friend Mary Taylor immigrated to New Zealand in 1845, and Anne may well be thinking of references in her letters to "the queer feeling of living as I do in 2 places at once."[47] This figurative transition overwrites the typical normalcy of the domestic setting with the potential for transformation and upheaval. At the same time, both metaphors focus not on the existing environments (i.e., the indigenous flora and fauna) but on Agnes's entry into them. What happens, they ask, when an introduced species reorients relations in an already existing web?

After more than a year working for the Murrays, Agnes returns to her earlier metaphor to comment on the "irresistible power of

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assimilation" in a closed bionetwork (87). She surmises that "one civilized man . . . doomed to pass a dozen years amid a race of intractable savages" could become a "barbarian himself" (87–88). She fears that she is adapting negatively to an ecosystem comprised of the upper middle classes and lower aristocracy. The introduction of Weston into the network gives her hope that she might evolve in the opposite direction, toward "a subject for contemplation, that was above me, not beneath" (88). Agnes reiterates her status as an anomalous species: she is an introduced individual in a preexisting cohort. Weston is, like her, a nonnative organism. She also represents her character as contingent rather than essential, able to adapt to surrounding influences. Agnes recognizes the same capacity for flux evident in her stint with the Bloomfields, manifest now in a noticeably larger environment. Finally, she stages two inversions: she displaces a domestic estate onto foreign territory (New Zealand, literally "down under") and upends socioeconomic hierarchies, positioning herself and the curate above her employers. Yet the spatial inversion does not precisely facilitate the social upheaval. The novel suggests not that the Murray estate is foreign, but that it is crucially unfamiliar to Agnes, who is not an indigenous resident. In both instances, she is the introduced species that alters the dynamic in an ecosystem, pointing to and playing with existing bonds within the web. Agnes's arrival reorients existing forms of interaction and relationality in the socioeconomic structures of the system.

Anne Brontë would have been conversant with the definition of an "introduced species" from any number of texts read in her childhood. *The Gardens and Menageries of the Zoological Society Delineated*, for example, which she annotated as a child in her father's library, spends over four pages detailing the introduction of the turkey into western Europe.[48] In his *Natural History of Selborne* (1789), another text kept in the Keighley Mechanics' Institute Library, Gilbert White notes how a "pretty green frog" was either introduced deliberately or "strayed from someone who kept them" domestically.[49] Taylor's letters detail the importation of nonnative cattle and sheep into the Pacific colony. Ecosystems were vulnerable to changing constituencies—whether due to importation or migration—and as introduced species became more regular fixtures, they necessarily altered the environments into which they had entered. White notes changes both to breeding and predatory relations: the aside about the frog comes in a more general explanation of a local food web (noting which animals consume reptiles and amphibians), and he describes how a farmer's introduction of a "parcel of black-faced

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hornless rams among his horned western ewes" resulted in the "shortest legs and the finest wool."[50]

The "introduced species," then, should be defined as a nonnative organism that comes to alter the dynamics of an existing ecosystem—and Agnes and the curate both fit these criteria. This point is made explicitly in the scene of Agnes's "botanizing," in which she longs "for some familiar flower that might recall the woody dales or green hillsides of home" (95). In retrieving for Agnes a primrose that she had tried in vain to gather, Weston opens up a conversation not about the flora of the local ecosystem but about that of their native lands. As the heroine explains that she does not care for violets, "for there are no sweet violets among the hills and valleys round my home," the scene delineates them as newcomers, detached from any home they once had, and as disruptive participants—flower-pickers—in a milieu that is not their own (96).

As nonnative participants who upset the seeming balance of the ecosystem, Agnes and Weston bring focus to inversions and reorientations. Plot-wise, they are the governess-turned-houseguest and the poor curate-turned-object-of-flirtation: as outsiders, they can be written into a variety of divergent positions. Conceptually, they are pivots for two distinct forms of ecological and socioeconomic displacement. The first, which functions through "name-calling," levels social differences by yoking characters across classes with nonhuman organisms. Agnes is not the only one who upends categories in this way, as when she compares John to a bear and Matilda to an abstract "animal"—a move that would be akin to a simplistic reversal, as in remapping the estate onto the Antipodes (59–60). The Murray family members also deploy identical terms across the social spectrum. The sisters call the cottagers "brutish," and so too is Weston "styled a vulgar brute" (78, 87). Moreover, if the curate is "such a beast," he is analogous to Sir Thomas Ashby (Rosalie's eventual husband), who is also "an ugly beast" (70). The near-exact iterations move up and down the spectrum, linking disparate groups by linguistic association. Weston, as introduced species, is the fulcrum in each pairing—even as, significantly, the inversions exist without him. The curate aside, Ashby and the cottagers are subject to the abstract language of animality. Whatever forms of balance exist in this ecosystem depend on instability: it is only upheaval that, rather paradoxically, creates equilibrium by assessing divergent classes in the same figurative scale.

Affiliated with one another by verbal signifiers, characters in *Agnes Grey* are also united in an ecological web, or what Timothy Morton has termed the "mesh": the "interconnectedness of all living and non-living

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things."[51] A representative sequence in chapter 12 begins by explaining that Agnes can visit the cottager Nancy only because the Murray sisters are otherwise occupied. Both girls are engaged directly with other organisms, human or not: Rosalie is dressing for a dinner party at the Ashby home, and Matilda is readying herself for a ride. Nancy, who has been sewing a shirt for her son, greets Agnes with anxiety that her cat has been taken, not by the Murray sons, who are at school, but by the gamekeeper. Weston soon appears, having rescued the cat, which was hunting rabbits, from said Murray employee. He asks Agnes to apologize on his behalf to the squire, who was with the gamekeeper during the incident. The cat, we are told explicitly, is both predator and prey: it has "found out the warren" and, as a result, found itself at the business end of the gamekeeper's gun (91). As Nancy insists that they both sit out the rain, Agnes and Weston awkwardly play musical chairs, each refusing to sit in a seat that may be desired by the other. Agnes returns to the estate only to find Matilda "in a ferocious humour" because her ride has been rained out (92). The chapter is short, hinging again on the interactions between the two introduced species, Agnes and Weston, but it also insists on the interrelations of every human actor with a series of other ecological factors—contingent changes in weather, domestic and wild animals, and the social calendar. As Morton argues, "there is no absolute center or edge" to the mesh: "Each point of the mesh is both the center and edge of a system of points."[52] In this way, the human animals are each implicated in connections that move in opposing directions or that stretch outward to children, employees, friends, prospective husbands, and pets. Lacking a center and a hierarchical orientation, cardinal distinctions such as "lower" and "upper" start to break down.

To be clear, *Agnes Grey* does not advocate an overthrow of social hierarchies. Even when its protagonist is most critical of the Murray family, calling them a "race of intractable savages," she also incriminates herself in that critique (87). Instead, it insists on the interconnectedness of everyone in socioeconomic networks—webs that are at once based in animal interactions and that include nonhuman species within them. A sequence like the one just summarized reminds us that Agnes exists within the same social and financial systems as her employers. Her mother has left the upper classes only to have the specter of her potential inheritance return once she is widowed, and her family's genteel poverty is the direct result of her father's (possibly misguided, possibly unfortunate) decision to invest in a "mercantile pursuit" (7). Anticipating his

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potential accrual of wealth, before it is lost, the "moral heroine" imagines herself committing the same sin of capitalist lust for which she later chastises her charges: "What happy hours Mary and I have passed . . . talking of future happiness to ourselves and our parents, of what we would do, and see, and *possess*" (7, emphasis mine). The actuality, in chapter 12 and throughout the section focused on the Murray ecosystem, is closer to the "mesh" or the network that Bruno Latour imports from biology into his critique of politics: with "no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences, no sharp separation . . . they take on the aspect of tangled beings, forming rhizomes."[53] In other words, as nodal points, Agnes and Weston draw focus to the myriad of environmental factors, living and not, that already prompted organisms in this system to adapt in a variety of ways (socially, financially, behaviorally), often in several directions at once. In the context of the 1840s, they point to a socioeconomic landscape in which financial effects cannot be traced to clear causes, in which people from different classes are implicated in the same dynamics of loss, gain, and exploitation.

4. Conclusion

The ecological register of *Agnes Grey*, then, is a form of realism that makes visible the unstable and entwined relations among human and nonhuman species and their environments. It acts to denaturalize the hierarchies that have been presumed to translate from the predatory food chain onto early Victorian socioeconomic strata—the same ladders that too often dictated relationships between members of different classes in the volatile 1840s. It insists that the appropriate object of critique not be the abuse of animals and marginalized subjects by a parasitic and "morally lax upper class," as Terry Eagleton and other scholars have suggested, but rather the capitalist structures of consumption and competition in which every character is implicated and through which forms of abjection are perpetrated.[54] In other words, the critique embedded in the novel does not name names or identify specific events from what was a tumultuous decade: it works at a more abstract level to represent and appraise the entanglement of socioeconomic responsibilities. An ecological interpretation of Brontë's novel does not excuse its protagonist: as demonstrated above, from the opening pages, both Agnes and her family are implicated in the same socioeconomic mesh as the gentry that they judge—by investment and education if not by bank balance or landholdings. Instead, it asks us to rethink social responsibility in

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relational terms, wherein human actions have effects that ripple out into a tangled web. As Moore has recently written, human beings are "always already interpenetrated with the rest of nature, and therefore always already [are] both producers and products of change in the web of life."[55]

So what are the implications of reading ecological thought into a novel written before the term "ecology" was coined? This essay does not wish to take a posthumanist perspective and argue that *Agnes Grey* grants animals consciousness or equivalence. If Snap helps reunite Weston and Agnes, we are reminded that he is only a dog with a "good master," playing a role (169). It also does not suggest that social stratification, abjection, and violence do not exist in the novel—servants are kept in their positions, marriages are made between like classes, and readers should be appalled by the torture of birds and the arrogance to which Agnes is often a witness (mute in the presence of others but not in her narration). Attention to the ecological and to the emergent sciences of the 1830s and 1840s does, however, shift focus from the socioeconomic and physical effects of marginalization to their root causes—to the species relations, adaptations, and inversions that alter, prompt, and forestall human and nonhuman animal dynamics. Where a workplace hierarchy or food chain exists, one might say, it exists only in and because of larger, more entangled structures.

The reading of ecological thought in Brontë's novel also has methodological implications for the discipline of Victorian studies. It partly refutes the "neglect, oversights, and errors" that have long ruled critical treatments of Anne in relation to her better-known sisters—and suggests that rereadings of *Agnes Grey* (and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*) are long overdue.[56] More broadly, the reframing of animals in this novel through ecological relations points to two bigger methodological challenges. Despite an impressive, productive increase in literary scholarship in Victorian animal studies and ecocriticism, very little work on animal ecosystems exists.[57] While animal studies has highlighted the human treatment of animals (animal rights, exploitation, extinction, hunting, imperialism, etc.) and the posthumanist identities of animals (language, consciousness, alterity),[58] it presently offers little to understand species relations in which humans and animals are nonequal but concomitant actors. Similarly, likely due to a politicized commitment to the effects of the Anthropocene, work in Victorian ecocriticism tends to center on questions of climate change, extraction, extinction, and energy circulation.[59] Animal ecologies slip between these cracks, and their relevance

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to issues of human and animal species relationality certainly bears further critical attention. At the same time, the publication date of *Agnes Grey* in 1847 points to the difficulties of situating "ecologies" in the early Victorian period—in a post-Romantic, pre-Darwinian moment of scientific flux. The excellent scholarship that exists, including the work by Scott and Parham, tends to focus on poetry and science fiction, on the literary texts that perhaps most overtly encapsulate changing ecological forms either in their construction or in their plots. And yet, as Brontë's work certainly suggests, and as Jesse Oak Taylor has argued in a different context, the nineteenth-century realist novel, with its quotidian "accumulated trivial acts of everyday life," is perhaps best equipped to stage the intricacies of species relations that play out in individual and generational timescales.[60]

Morton writes that the "vast, sprawling mesh" of ecology is a form of "radical intimacy" in that it is "open forever," endlessly linking sentient and nonsentient beings together.[61] If, in *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë refigures such radical intimacy as everyday relationality, her novel also points to a critical methodological challenge: to situate early Victorian socioeconomic relations within a vast ecological web in which humans are both a vital component and a conceptual limitation on far vaster critiques of entangled animal, financial, and behavioral systems.

Notes

I would like to thank the Dartmouth College undergraduates in my spring 2018 Brontës senior seminar for listening and responding to the very first inklings of this argument.

1. Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*, 12. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. I am thinking here of statements like this one from Donna Haraway: "The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters." Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.
3. Cary Wolfe defines the discipline of "Animal Studies" by explaining how "the animals treated in it undergo an ontological shift from things to, in some sense, persons." Arguably, *Agnes Grey* does not go this far, but it does suggest that the human-animal hierarchy can be destabilized in specific instances, as I will illustrate. Wolfe, "Human, All Too Human," 567.

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4. Although more scholarship on *Agnes Grey* has appeared in the twenty-first century, Anne Brontë's narrative work has been frequently "dismissed in a cursory fashion," as Susan Meyer notes, "as less passionate and original than the fiction of her two better-known sisters." Of her two novels, moreover, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has traditionally received more critical attention. Meyer, "Words on 'Great Vulgar Sheets,'" 4.
5. Newman, "Animals in *Agnes Grey*," 237.
6. Berg, "'Hapless Dependents,'" 177–78.
7. Berg suggests that the term "animal," "synonymous with 'natural' and 'biological,' was a category employed by those at the top of the ladder to justify the exploitation of those at the bottom." Berg, "'Hapless Dependents,'" 178.
8. For work on animal rights activism, see Kreilkamp, "Petted Things," 87–110. Berg has a discussion of the early nineteenth-century rhetoric around vegetarianism.
9. Beer, *Darwin's Plots,* 170. Beer's discussion, while in the context of her chapter on George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, relates broadly to the usage of the term in Darwin's text and Victorian scientific culture.
10. Beer, *Darwin's Plots,* 170; Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 99.
11. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 45, 33.
12. In using this term, I am thinking of both the botanical rhizome, with its horizontal web of roots and branches, and of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorization of multiplicities. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome "is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system . . . without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states." It operates by "variation" and "expansion." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 23.
13. Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, 134.
14. Both terms were arguably coined by Ernst Haeckel in his *Generelle Morphologie* in 1866. In that text, Haeckel invented and defined the term "ecology" as "the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and organic environment, including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact." McIntosh, *The Background of Ecology*, 7–8.
15. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 140.
16. Bewell, *Natures in Translation*, 1.
17. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 1.

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18. Parham, *Green Man Hopkins*, 77.
19. Adelene Buckland states that "at Keighley Mechanics' Institute the Brontë sisters had access to the Bridgewater Treatises, and to Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes*." Buckland, *Novel Science,* 145.
20. Wordsworth, *A Complete Guide to the Lakes*, 15.
21. Brontë, "The North Wind," in *The Brontës*, lines 1, 7.
22. Brontë, "Memory," in *The Brontës*, lines 19–21.
23. Parham, *Green Man Hopkins*, 77.
24. Herschel, *Astronomy*, 264.
25. Mill, *A System of Logic*, 385.
26. [Chambers,] *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, 145.
27. [Chambers,] *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, 149–50.
28. [Chambers,] "Educability of Animals," 97–98.
29. Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith include several pages on the Brontës' exposure to natural history in their *Oxford Companion to the Brontës*. Anne would have had access to reviews and discussions of *Vestiges* in *Blackwood's* magazine, which was avidly followed by the family, as well as to the books in the library. As Alexander and Smith explain, the catalog for the library lists Lyell's *Geology* among a number of seminal and popular works of natural history, and Lyell's text includes a discussion of Lamarck. Alexander and Smith, *Oxford Companion,* 338–40.
30. Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 578.
31. Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 578.
32. Secord, *Visions of Science*, 166.
33. As Secord notes, Lyell had to borrow a copy of the *Philosophie zoologique*, which was not translated into English until 1914. Secord, *Visions of Science,* 166.
34. Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*, 112.
35. Lamarck, *Zoological Philosophy*, 108.
36. Griffiths, *The Age of Analogy*, 159.
37. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 1.
38. Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 6.
39. Berg, "'Hapless Dependents,'" 185. See Surridge, "Dogs'/Bodies, Women's Bodies" and *Bleak Houses*.
40. I am thinking of reports of the 1842 General Strike that affected mill workers in Yorkshire, in which workers were brutally put down by forces with superior strength. See Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842*.
41. Kreilkamp, "Petted Things," 88.
42. Meyer, "Words on 'Great Vulgar Sheets,'" 8.

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43. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 10.
44. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos*, 10.
45. The sparse scholarship that exists on this portion of the novel (which is substantially longer than that focused on the Bloomfields) tends to point out only that the human and nonhuman residents of the estate embody a typical upper-class family, in which women, like domesticated beasts, are prepared for the market.
46. Scholars generally agree that Horton Lodge is based on Agnes's experiences as governess at Thorp Green Hall, in Little Ouseburn, which was seventy miles from Haworth. Both Haworth and Little Ouseburn are in Yorkshire.
47. Stevens, *Mary Taylor, Friend of Charlotte Brontë*, 77. Helen Lucy Blythe associates this reference with "missionary work" and the "Victorian colonial romance with the Antipodes." Blythe, *Victorian Colonial Romance*, 56.
48. *Gardens and Menagerie*, 209–15.
49. White, *Natural History*, 46.
50. White, *Natural History*, 135.
51. Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 28.
52. Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 29.
53. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 24.
54. Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, 122.
55. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 42.
56. Pike, "*Agnes Grey*," 135. Although Pike argues that the novel "presents a far more complex and problematic narrative on the politics of class than critics have acknowledged," she too relies heavily on the form of the hierarchy and "social stratification." Pike, "*Agnes Grey*," 141, 143.
57. The scholarship that does exist, like Alexis Harley's work on the rabbit as an invasive species in nineteenth-century Australia, tends to come from a postcolonial methodology and/or focus on disrupted ecosystems. Harley, "Rabbits and the Rise of Australian Nativism."
58. I am thinking especially of important edited collections, including Morse and Danahay, *Victorian Animal Dreams*; and Mazzeno and Morrison, *Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*.
59. Here I am thinking in particular of MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature*; and Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture*.
60. Taylor, "Where Is Victorian Ecocriticism?" 877.
61. Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 8.

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