ABSTRACT
FROM PASTORALS TO PATERSON: ECOLOGY IN THE POETRY AND POETICS OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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Modernist poet William Carlos Williams died in 1962 – a landmark year in the history of the modern environmentalist movement. He did not live to see contemporary culture come to the deeper appreciation of humanity’s place in the world which we now know as ecology. This dissertation will argue, however, that supporting his entire oeuvre of poetry are philosophical and poetic underpinnings which resonate strongly with – and usefully anticipate – our modern understanding of the interpenetrative relationship between natural and culture, human and nonhuman.

I begin by tracing the roots of Williams’s “ecopoetics” back to the father of Williams’s beloved free verse: Walt Whitman. Both Whitman and Williams use nature as subject and trope in their poetry, but the latter pointedly improves upon the work of the former by shifting the voice of his poetry from an anthropocentric (human-centered) perspective to a more ecocentric one – one which breaks down the traditional American Romantic notion of nature as apart from us, instead more readily acknowledging humanity as integral part and parcel of nature’s cyclical systems.

In the middle sections of the work, the focus centers exclusively upon Williams, especially in his earlier poetry and prose collection Spring and All (1921), as well as in his later five-book epic Paterson. In these, I reveal three distinct ecopoetic qualities of his poetry: 1) a continuation of the ecocentric poetic voice; 2) treatment of the “imagination” as a natural force (akin to steam or lightning) which humans harness to generate art; and, 3) an anticipation of modern ideas about the “local” in his use of his native New Jersey landscape as poetic subject. Through close readings, the study highlights these qualities as integral facets of Williams’s poetics, marking his as a proto-ecopoet.

The dissertation closes with a broader historical contextualization of Williams’s ecopoetics as contrasted with other Modernists contemporary to his day – specifically Wallace Stevens and Lorine Niedecker. Through formal elements that mirror the previously argued traits of ecopoetics, we find Williams exceeding his peers and, I conclude, ultimately anticipating the kind of poetry we see being written by ecopoets in our own time.