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Samantha Walton, 'Ecopoetry' in Noel Castree ed. *Companion to Environmental Studies*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Ecopoetry can be defined as poetry that addresses, or can be read in ways that address, the current conditions of our environmental crisis. *Ecopoetics* refers to its theorisation, and *ecopoets*, of course, to the writers themselves—although few writers adopt the label without some qualification. These terms emerged in the late 1990s; since then, they have become increasingly recognised, and their meanings debated and honed by scholars and writers. Magazines dedicated to new ecopoetry have been established, and the publication of ecopoetry anthologies has contributed to the formation of a new canon of ecologically-oriented verse. Scholarly work has furthered this project of retrospective canon-formation, as ecocritics have sought to trace and name alternative environmental traditions in Western and non-Western literary canons.

Ecopoetry can, then, be divided into two categories: that which is consciously written as 'ecopoetry', and that which has been claimed or reclaimed as such. For living poets writing environmental or nature-oriented poetry, the label is one that they might choose to adopt, or from which they might separate themselves. By adopting the label, poets make a conscious statement about the intentions and orientations of their work. For example, authors and critics often propose that ecopoetry might lead humanity back into conscious awareness of the ecological entanglement and stimulate care and concern. Seen in this way, ecopoetry can be framed as an active and activist form of writing and reading, contributing to the task of repairing divisions between humanity and the ecosystems that constitute and support us. There is no one form or style definitive of ecopoetry. In terms of content and theme, ecopoetry might focus attention on the language used to describe nature, be it poetic, scientific, technical or commonplace. It might expose tropes and traditions of nature representation, and challenge dominant discourses such as landscape aesthetics, cartography, or environmental economics. Ecopoetry may draw attention to specific places in order to deepen understanding of natural processes and cultural histories, or reflect on the kinds of attachments and feelings people experience in relation to the more-than-human world.

Since its inception, ecopoetry has been entangled with environmentally-oriented literary criticism. In attempting to expose the cultural-roots of environmental crisis, ecocritics interrogated constructions of nature in Western intellectual history; in particular, the pastoral visions of harmony, retreat, and nostalgia derived from Virgil's *Eclogues* (see Gifford 2010), and the Romantic construction of Nature as 'a dynamic, living, self-transforming whole' (Rigby, p.24), of which we are part. The first theorisations of ecopoetry come from critics, not from poets, and arise in ecocritical reappraisals of Romanticism. Debates about whether Romanticism really did *romanticise* nature persist, and they influence ecopoetry in decisive ways. Some critics insist that Romantic poetry established an attitude to the natural world that is of value to contemporary writers who try to address the environmental crisis through literature that sparks the imagination and the senses. For others, such as Timothy

Morton, Romantic Nature-worship and yearning for restored unity only deepens the separation: 'Nature fails to serve ecology well' (2010, p.3).

Lawrence Buell's definition of 'environmental literature' provides another key starting point for theories of ecopoetics. According to Buell, not all writing about nature is 'environmental', but that which is may a) show how human and natural history are interconnected; b) represent nature as a process, not a constant given or static; c) express ethical concern that extends beyond the human; and/or d) acknowledge responsibility for anthropogenic environmental damage (p.7-8). This 'it-is-or-it-isn't' approach was pursued by Jonathan Bate in *The Song of the Earth* (2000). Here, he defines ecopoetry as 'not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it' (p.42). For Bate, Wordsworth comes out as an (or rather, *the*) ecopoet, because of his attention to the affective, emotional, ethical and intellectual impact that nature has on the lyric 'I'. Ecopoetry is, in his definition, more phenomenological than it is political. It is concerned less with the kinds of representational politics essential to feminist and critical race theory, and more with the evocation or stimulation of a mood, tone, or force of attachment capable of re-making the lost connection with nature. Language organised as poetry need not separate us from the earth (as Bate believed was the prevailing theory amongst postmodern literary critics at the time), but could be a means of 'answering nature's own rhythms, and echoing of the song of the earth itself' (p.76).

Unsurprisingly—given Bate's depoliticisation of the moment of 'nature-experience'—the ecopoets he names are white, Western men, whose major obstacles to unmediated contact with nature are the conditions of modernity, knowledge of science, the 'meddling' intellect, and language itself. Ecopoetry was first established, then, as the preserve of 'a rather exclusive club of neo-romantic, male poets', as Harriet Tarlo puts it (2007). This selective bias is reproduced in many studies; for example, in *Sustainable Poetry*, Leonard Scigal selects four white men, including Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, as America's foremost ecopoets. Their poetry is able to ponder the referential capacity of language, and question of whether it brings humanity closer to the natural world or pushes us further away, presumably without any of the messy complications presented by race, gender, or sexuality.

Many writers now consciously reject Romanticism as a source of ecopoetics. This is because Romanticism, in brief, addressed historically specific conditions of urban expansion and agricultural and industrial revolutions, responding with National Parks and nature reserves. Such thinking and organising is argued to be incapable of addressing the globalised conditions of our environmental crisis. It also excludes non-white, non-Western environmental understandings and spiritualities, and instead centres the experiences of able-bodied men trained in the intellectual traditions of European philosophy. The existential and emotional dramas of those writers have provided to be far from universal. Camille Dungy explains: 'Many black writers simply do not look at their environment from the same perspective as Anglo-American writers ... The pastoral as diversion, a construction of a culture that dreams, through landscape and animal life, of a certain luxury or innocence, is less prevalent.'

Instead, poems are ‘written from the perspective of the workers of the field’; these poems are undeniably pastorals, which ‘describe moss, rivers, trees, dirt, caves, dogs, fields: elements of an environment steeped in a legacy of violence, forced labor, torture, and death’ (p.xxi). Bearing this out, Lucille Clifton’s ‘surely I am able to write poems’ reveals a conflicting and deeply ambivalent perspective on nature, informed by African American history, Western Romanticism and personal sense-experiences of nature-contact. The poem begins by celebrating the natural world, but ends with the question: ‘why / is there under that poem always / an other poem?’ (Dungy ed., p.vii). LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs’ ‘My First Black Nature Poem™’ deals with Nature™ as an artificial construct which excludes black bodies and colludes in the erasure of legacies of slavery and racist violence in the supposedly pristine American wilderness: ‘that water got too much memory.’ Attention to black nature writing does not just reveal the political dimension of cultural histories of nature: it is fundamental to understanding the ways in which perception of nature is never free from social conditions. The affective quality of the moment of nature-contact which ecopoetry, according to Bate, is meant to capture, will be qualitatively different depending on the extent to which one is both vulnerable to and traumatised by bigotry and oppression.

Poets and critics have begun to chart alternative histories of ecopoetry, broadening out the initial emphasis on the Romantic heritage, recognising the contributions of women and poets of colour, incorporating more intersectional approaches to nature and ecology, and exploring the ecopoetical significance of experimental and avant-garde traditions. Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Grey Street’s *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (2013) includes Harlem Renaissance writers Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer, whose poem ‘Reapers’ addresses experiences of dislocation, diaspora and oppressive land-relations under conditions of slavery and rural poverty (p.59). The catastrophic social and environmental injustices of colonisation and its aftermath are reflected across diverse postcolonial ecopoetries. In ‘Genocide, Again’ Kwame Dawes connects a land overgrown and depopulated of human inhabitants through brutality and slaughter, while Craig Santos Perez’s ‘all with ocean views’ uses found-text to critique the ways his native Guam has become an idyllic tourist destination for its former and current military occupiers at the expense of displaced indigenous Chamorro people (p.225; p.461).

The critique of Romanticism and—perhaps more importantly—its wider cultural legacy, is particularly potent in these works. This is not least because of the modes of dwelling and inhabitation favoured by early theorists of ecopoetry are either not relevant to indigenous environmental understandings, or have so utterly colonised the imaginations of Western tourists and indigenous people alike that many native understandings have been lost along with land rights, languages, and mutually sustaining ecological relations. Decolonising ecopoetics might take the form of reclaiming lost and forcibly suppressed indigenous language. Such an approach is found in diverse postcolonial literatures. For example, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid found that Scots Vernacular words ‘watergaw’ and ‘yow-trummle’ described ‘natural occurrences and phenomena of all kinds which have apparently never been noted by

the English mind. No words for them exist in English' (Grieve, p.28). Another example is the Anishinaabe word 'puhpowee' rediscovered by Robin Wall-Kimmerer, an ethnobiologist and member of the Potawatomi tribe. Puhpowee is 'the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight' (2015). This word reveals an understanding of natural processes outside the grasp of Western science, delimited as it is by an imprecise technical vocabulary. Although she is not a poet, Wall-Kimmerer's work has been picked up by poets interested in the ways in which language influences socio-cultural perception of the natural world, and behaviour towards it (see Keller).

Critical gender theory has also contributed to ecopoetics. Feminists and queer theorists have focused on exposing and critiquing binary understandings which underpin human-nature relations, and which revolve around constructions of man/woman, mind/body, intellect/emotion and, of course, culture/nature. While much early ecofeminism was deeply essentialist in its understanding of gender, more recent ecofeminist and queer scholarship has focused on revealing the ways in which hierarchical dualisms have reinforced the exploitation of women, queer people and nature. In ecopoetry, this might mean addressing both the ways in which nature-appreciation and its expression has been gendered, and the obstacles women writers face in a patriarchal society. For example, a poem by Lila Matsumoto responds to Dorothy Wordsworth's writing, including the gendered division of labour on walking excursions her brother William, and Coleridge: '(the men write their poems) ... she looks for cottages where they might take refreshments and pass the night'.

As with all feminist scholarship, feminist contributions to ecopoetics have involved retrospective recuperation of women's writing. Anglo-American modernists H.D., Muriel Rukeyser and Marianne Moore have been reclaimed as ecopoets. The attempt to inhabit non-human subject positions in H.D.'s 'Oread', or Moore's attention to the movement and points of contact between bodies and matter in 'The Fish', each avoid altogether the experiences of the lyric 'I' (Fisher-Wirth and Street, p.40; p.48). For the poet and editor Harriet Tarlo, the rejection of the 'dominant' and 'domineering' lyric 'I' is an essential move in escaping from legacies of Romanticism (Fisher-Wirth, qtd. in Tarlo 2007). In the work collected in her *How2 Ecopoetry* special edition, poems resist the lyric 'I' through multi-voice translation pieces or the use of found text as a form of ecological practice modelled on recycling. Ecopoetry moves, then, from being a late-Romanticist movement to a late-Modernist one. Formal innovations and conceptual practices are used to denaturalise 'nature' language; to reveal socio-environmental interdependencies; and to model ecological relations. According to Lynn Keller, 'experimental poetics ... might be helping shift our sense of human/nonhuman relations away from the anthropocentric and might enhance our sense of kinship and interdependence with other life forms.'

Experimental poetry shares ground and techniques with both with disability ecopoetics and queer ecopoetics when it crosses imaginative boundaries, and challenges humanity's supposed separateness from the 'natural world' and from other bodies. Through multimedia works, collaboration and performances, poets stage encounters between bodies which transgress normative forms of intimacy (see

Kuppers and Leto). As Angela Hume states: ‘nonnormative intimacies are the stuff of disability ecopoetics—a poetics of interrelation between humans and other-than-humans on a shared path.’ Ecopoetics here means an orientation towards bodies and matter that can play out in a range of ways, often unexpected, in individual poems or creative projects.

New terms are being coined to better distinguish between—or further worry at—different kinds of ecologically-oriented work, including biopoetics; lithopoetics (stone poetics, see Weishaus); hydro-poetics (influenced by the connective capacities of water); Mestizo poetics (created through cultural clash and hybridity in Latin America context, see Vicuña); and what Tarlo terms ‘radical landscape poetry’, concerned with new approaches to landscape representation. It is likely that ecopoetics will remain an overarching term for referring to consciously environmental writing and practice, albeit one which writers, critics, editors and readers will continue to question, redefine and transform.

Learning Resources

Online

Ecopoetics. Publishing 2001-2009. <https://ecopoetics.wordpress.com/>

Ecotone. Publishing since 2005. <https://ecotonemagazine.org/>

Epizootics Zine: Online Literary Journal for the Contemporary Animal. Publishing since 2016. <https://epizooticszine.wordpress.com/>

Jonathan Skinner has contributed a number of posts on ecopoetry to Jacket2:

<http://jacket2.org/commentary/jonathan-skinner>

Print

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