

4-Vivid Entanglements: Materializing Climate Crisis in Mainstream Poetry

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Abstract: How does contemporary mainstream Anglophone poetry represent climate crisis? Taking this simple question as starting point to critical exploration, this article contends that mainstream poets, often dismissed as conventionally realist (and, as a result, very seldom taken as objects of ecocritical study) as opposed to the experimental *avant-garde*, use innovative poetics in order to figure a crisis defeating both imagination and representation, as well as metapoetically interrogate their own modes of representing nature. Through the study of a recent anthology dedicated to the climate crisis, Kate Simpson's *Out of Time, Poetry from the Climate Emergency* (2021), we will see how mainstream poets experiment with form and language, focusing attention on the visibility, iconicity, materiality and plasticity of the poem, rather than the "hyperobject" (Morton) they purportedly represent. Troubling mimetic representation in order to open up the poem into a more problematic site of meaning, these poems grope with issues of scale, space and voice, pushing the reader to actively engage with the recalcitrant text and, potentially, experience their entanglement in the world through poetic artifice.

*Abolie, la prétention, esthétiquement une erreur, quoiqu'elle régît les
chefs-d'œuvre,
d'inclure au papier subtil du volume autre chose par exemple que
l'horreur de la forêt,
ou le tonnerre muet épars au feuillage : non le bois intrinsèque et dense
des arbres.
(Mallarmé, 210)*

The crisis of representation affecting contemporary ecopoetry appears as yet another variation on the crisis of figuration which has defined literary modernity since Mallarmé's foundational "Crise de Vers". From the *fin de siècle* partisans of "pure poetry" rejecting the pretensions of

the realistic in favour of the symbolic, to the ecological poetry of today grappling with the “impossible representational demands of the Anthropocene” (Auje, 2) the question has, seemingly, shifted focus from the aesthetic to the ethical, but remains grounded in the same issue, namely the fraught relationship between language and the world which has become synonymous of our modern condition. Although the crisis of representation in literature, now crystallised in the prevailing poststructuralist idea that language fails to represent the world, is not new, climate change, one of the defining symptoms of our contemporary ecological crisis, has added a layer of complexity to the issue, posing new ethical and aesthetic challenges to the poet. Where Mallarmé pondered over how best to figure the forest without, however, calling into question the very concept of nature, today’s poets grapple with the representational demands of a burning forest, as well as the literal and figurative end of nature.

How to represent our “dwelling in crisis” to use Frederick Buell’s phrase? “Dizzily convoluted, comprising many correlated at times seemingly contradictory processes happening in multiple places and times, at varying rates and scales and with myriad types and degrees of consequence” (Banerjee, 3), the environmental crisis is set to defeat representation just as it has been memorably said to defeat imagination. How to show indeed the “tremendous complexity and the variegated multisensory, material and representational aspects of climate breakdown” or even the “slow violence of environmental impacts unfolding over the years, even centuries and millennia” (Banerjee, 7)? Climate change, one of the most striking examples of Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects”, has made the question of vastly discrepant scales, both temporal and geographical, one of the main focuses of ecocriticism and ecopoetry, encouraging critics to call for a new “scalar literacy” (Clark, 38)¹. Questions of scale have brought with them new issues of “resolution, visibility, communicability, iconicity and indexicality” (Banerjee, 3), all of which are relevant to scientific studies of climate breakdown, but also to studies of those poets who wish to address the issue in representational terms. It is no wonder so many contributions on the climate crisis circle back to issues of “imagining the unimaginable” or “representing the unrepresentable”, in an inextricable loop which appears to underpin both creative and critical thinking on the topic.

Questions of mimesis, mimetic fidelity and illusion, the limits of objective representation and issues of reference in writings on nature, have run through ecocriticism since its beginnings. Already posed in Laurence Buell's nuanced defence of "the now disputable aesthetic of classical realism" (90) in nature writing, Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature* (2009), coined the concept of "ecomimesis" to characterize the techniques in Romantic poetry that attempt to provide a (falsely and thus problematically) transparent view of nature. In line with recent philosophical and environmental thought, from Bruno Latour's hybrids to Morton and Stacy Alaimo's work on the Anthropocene subject's enmeshment in the world, nature and natural phenomena have been shown to be neither transcendent nor distinguishable from us, prompting Matthew Griffiths to conclude that "traditional literary categories are problematically placed to engage with the complexities of climate change, because we cannot consider the climate as a single phenomenon that is separate from us and can be mimetically represented in language" (20).

I. Mainstream Ecopoetics

But what do these considerations on mediated and unmediated "reality", calling for a re-examination of our modes (and subjects) of representation, mean concretely to poets currently writing on the climate crisis? In a bid to give a (necessarily limited) overview of how contemporary mainstream Anglophone poets deal with the representational dilemmas of the climate crisis, I have chosen here to study Kate Simpson's anthology, *Out of Time, Poetry from the Climate Emergency*, published in 2021 in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Offering a medley of current writing on the climate crisis aimed at a wide-ranging public, the anthology gathers a number of highly-followed and popular award-winning poets such as Sean Hewitt, Raymond Antrobus, Pascale Petit or Sue Riley, and has been well-received by the specialised and mainstream press. As in many such anthologies committed to uniting the pen and the sword, part of the proceeds are donated to a public cause (here a British environmental campaigning association, "Friends of the Earth"). The collection of 50 poems is divided into five chapters (emergency, grief, transformation, work, rewilding), following a traditional progression from anger, irony and grief to final expressions of "tender (if fragile) moments of hope" (24), a

redemptive narrative that is frequently found in anthologies dedicated to catastrophic events, as in WWI poetry collections, a staple of British school curricula. The themes and tropes are consistent with activist environmental poetry, among which the lament on humankind's destructive behaviours, the decentering of the human figure through a focus on non-human voices, prevailing imagery of waste, debris, extinction and its attending bio-chemical terminology and variations on Clément and Skinner's "third landscape" ("abandoned terrain, transitional zones, wastelands, swamps, moors, bogs, but also the edges of roads, shores, railway embankments", 264). Despite the editor's assurances that the "anthology does not simply celebrate and appreciate the beauty of nature in an attempt to emotionally reconnect readers through a form of neo-Romanticism" (24), the collection also features vestiges of traditional nature poetry, namely the classic opposition between nature and culture resulting in the yearning for a pristine nature separate from humanity (often manifested through animal subjects as in "Polar Bear in Norilsk", or "Blue Morpho, Crypsis") and the symbolism of man's primeval fall.

What strikes the reader at first is thus not radically novel themes or alterations to the lyric mode, but the highly visible language and formal layout of the poems, rife with typographical freedoms and visual play (stanza asymmetry, bold type, pattern poems), techniques usually encountered in more experimental ecological poetry (published in reviews such as *ecopoetics*, with affinities to language poetry). In recent decades, poetry of climate change, often experimental and/or academic in its origins, published in confidential reviews, has flowed into the so-called "mainstream"², in part through the publication of widely-received anthologies³ and the multiplication of publically-funded projects, curated by highly visible institutional poets (C.A. Duffy's 2015 "Keep in The Ground" *Guardian* project and Simon Armitage's creation of the Laurel Prize in 2020 are cases in point). Kate Simpson's anthology places itself in the same ideological line as these popular poets who have, in their official capacity at least, often favoured simplicity and accessibility over experimentation in order to interact directly with the general public. This accessibility is what has led many ecocritics, Griffiths among them, to be wary of mainstream poetry's capacity to engage fruitfully with the climate crisis, underlining that institutionally ordered poems and

anthologies, are “more than likely to confirm our existing ideologies rather than challenging them”, thus failing “Eliot’s criterion for poetry’s social function” (158). For Griffiths, mainstream poetry is not successful partly because it does not consciously adopt “innovative” poetics in the modernist tradition which are, in his view, the best manner to work against the assimilation of climate change into nature poetry and “explore the forces and principles that contribute to its emergence across the XXth century, rather than its symptoms” (176).

Mainstream” poetry is indeed regularly opposed to “experimental” “avant-garde” or “neo-modernist” poetry in critical discourse (this is all the more apparent in ecocriticism which rarely focuses on non-experimental productions), a contention which fails to take into account that the modernist aesthetic has entirely permeated mainstream British poetry, as already suggested in the conclusion of Ian Gregson’s *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism* (1996). Yet, mainstream poetry (featuring a “conventionally poetic personal lyric, premised on stable conceptions of selfhood”, according to Griffith, 22) is still implicitly accused of comforting the public in its realist illusions and expectations, as underlined by poet Mario Petrucci’s comment on how our

processes of perception and representation [...] are marred and distorted by being trammelled into certain stock ways of expressing oneself and understanding oneself, [running the risk of missing] all the things one has to understand, know, experiment with (along with those we *can’t* know, or at best merely glimpse) in order to be completely human, to be fully related to everything that happens to us (Petrucci 2009, cited by Griffiths, 23).

However, far from relying on “stock ways of expressing and understanding oneself” to engage with the complex phenomena of climate change, this anthology shows that contemporary mainstream poetry experiments with innovative poetics, their attempts at disrupting form and language sometimes resulting in a striking open-endedness. According to Simpson, the collection is

not simply about conjuring a path to help others imagine its shape, surface, texture and direction but demolishing the structure of the path entirely – recognising the limitations of straight edges – looking for something less linear and more nuanced. (20)

Issues of linearity and non-linearity inform the construction of the anthology: it is through the jostling of more conventional “nature poems” and experimental texts characterized by representational and interpretative uncertainties, that an impression of cumulative

derangement and disjunction is created. Rarely do the selected poems express a stable sense of the world and a unicity of the lyric subject (the shifting, porous, boundaries of the self perhaps best shown in the chapter entitled “Transformations”), as they attempt to represent the climate crisis, broken down into scrambled, sensorial, figurations, lacking both formal and emotional linearity. Perhaps the two most emblematic poems of this linear derangement, at least formally, are “Geography Lesson” and “Eclogue of the Garden 9” which, in forcing us to tip the book over to decipher the text, quite literally ask us to disarrange our reading practices.

II. “To Actively Look”

Timothy Clark coins a word to describe our nonplussed reaction to the urgency of our predicament: “stuplimity” – “like other unwholesome aspects of the Anthropocene, we mostly respond to mass extinction with stuplimity: the aesthetic experience in which astonishment is united with boredom” (12). One of the more militant goals of ecopoetry is to prompt a new awareness of the world and its systems by challenging our preconceived notions of how nature is written about and thus confounding our established reading, thinking, and ultimately, living practices. This has encouraged experimental ecopoets to search for new forms of representation, leading sometimes to arbitrariness and formlessness, “straining the boundaries of accessibility, relevance and even readability” (Clark, 176) into an obscurity which can be detrimental to their activist agenda. Keenly aware of the importance of readability and communicability, Simpson finds a middle way between experimentation and convention in her anthology, while choosing poems that draw attention to the physical act of writing and reading, in an effort to draw readers out of their “complacency” (18). Her introduction poses the fundamental question “what does it take to make us actively look?” (19). As an answer, she insists on the importance of language, urging us “to start looking more seriously to words as building blocks – tools for ecological restoration, [...], placing value on the restorative properties of linguistics as part of our rewilding efforts” (22). If Simpson’s belief in the transformative properties of poetry perhaps overstates its role in inciting behavioural change, it nevertheless has the merit of foregrounding language in a genre which, under its mainstream form at least, is more often read for its message and referent. This resonates with Scott Knickerbocker’s call for a move away from mimetic, realist poetry towards a more “sensuous” and figurative ecopoetics in *The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language* (2012), giving prominence to the materiality of language and the body of the poem in order to “enact rather than merely represent, the immediate, embodied experience of nonhuman nature” (17).

As editor of the anthology, Simpson’s attention has arrested on a number of highly vivid poems which aim, through experiments in typography, punctuation and spacing, at being eye-catching and, consequently, eye-opening. Rarely however do these poems engage directly or literally with the climate crisis, moving beyond conventional realistic representation towards a more disrupted, interconnected figuration of the subject and world in crisis. The anthology shows poets using a range of formal strategies to explore material, sensorial and, for the most radical, almost non-representational, modes of figuring the world. Keenly aware of, and yet playing with, the limitations of representing the crisis in poetry, the poets display themselves groping with language, textual space and established forms, materializing the struggle towards expression in the body of their poems. In turn, our reading is altered as we are pushed to actively engage with the recalcitrant text, and gain through a material awareness of the reading process itself, a multi-layered consciousness of the world.

III. Plays with Space: Connections and Disconnections

From the first poem of the anthology ("New Planet, Who Dis"), a compact block of print brimming over its margins and punctured with blanks, to "One Breath", a one-sentence paragraph squeezed between two wide banks of space, an ongoing play with poetic spacing, hierarchizing and framing, signals a resistance to the codified inscription of the poem on the page. "New Planet, Who Dis" does not offer a readily apparent explanation for its use of contracted margins and intra-textual blanks: in fact, the tone is abrasively off-hand and the last line ("what you want a moral too? fuck off") denies a satisfying conclusion to the poem as well as calling into question its whole point. The contrast between the crowded page and the dissolution of the final sentence into blank space in no way appeases or resolves the urgency of its tone, placing the whole anthology under a liminal uncertainty. There is something going on in the margins, out of reach of our reading gaze, to paraphrase Morton on Hillman's "A Geology" poem, but what exactly?

Throughout the collection, conventional and less conventional examples of spatialized text are put to the fore, through disrupted stanza shapes, elastic margins, and plays with intra-textual and extra-textual space. Vahni Capildeo's "Scales of Loss and Longing" is divided into stanzas to the right and left of the page, mimetically evoking the two uneven sides of a scale in a visual and emotional imbalance which remains unresolved at the end of the poem. More visually striking, though still conventional in form and content, is the non-figurative pattern poetry explored by Rosamund Taylor in "From Sperm Whale to Colossal Squid" and Sue Riley in her Ginko Prize-winning poem, "A Polar Bear in Norilsk". Both texts give voice to nonhuman subjects, choosing to break down the linearity of the poem as they move towards experiences beyond the human scale, as shown in "A Polar Bear in Norilsk"'s first lines:

if I could find
if I could rest here or here if I look
if I could find the hard edges of quiet of cold of ice

Written after the news story that took the internet by storm in 2019, Riley's poem has to compete with the iconic value of a photograph showing a haggard polar bear roaming the streets of an industrial Siberian town. The polar bear itself, "an indisputable image of climate change" ("Why the Polar Bear"), is a recurrent trope in discussions over rising sea levels, and was notably used in former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion's "The Sorcerer's Mirror" (2009), as part of a campaign to reduce carbon emissions. Though Riley's final lines, in their appeal to "go back" to a pristine state of nature, do not move past the conventional "polar sublime" criticized by Griffiths (15), the gaping lines attempt to signify loss and trauma that cannot be articulated in human terms while showcasing the limits of our necessarily anthropomorphic use of language (typically, the poem never does reveal the missing object of the first line: "if I could find").

Moving past these conventional figurations of the climate crisis that fail to disrupt our habitual modes of reading, Karen McCarthy Woolf's "The Science of Life 492" uses blank spaces and an aesthetic of erasure, to reveal the potentially infinite allusions and associations hidden under monologic scientific discourse. The "humument" or erasure-poem is a form of found poetry,

recycling another text (here the 1929 *Encyclopaedia of Popular Science*, co-authored by H.G. Wells and Julian Huxley) out of which a poem is exhumed. In the search for unintended concordances, phrases or words are isolated from their original context and new meanings and effects are hewn out of the original. Following in the footsteps of Tom Phillips' celebrated *A Humument*⁴ (1970-2016), Woolf draws out "Hence" (extracted from "**The Science of Life**"), a reflection on the meaning of consequence and the endlessly branching connections in texts and ecosystems:

Hence*

As the wind blows
 innumerable plump and hideous
landfolk

insignificant in themselves but rich —
 It is a strange world
...]

*An Ode

 Another
spasm was being prepared
 and the climate
began to change

According to the poet, the practise of the erasure-poem allows her to unearth a "text which articulates an oppositional view [...] to expose that view itself, bring it out, amplify it" ("Introduction to Erasure Poems"). The poem is implicitly grounded in the entanglement of the invisible source text (materialized by the blanks) and the words which emerge out of it in a changed context: the scientific description of life in an underwater pond flowers into a fantastical and scathing vignette of the Western world ("plump and hideous/landfolk/insignificant in themselves but rich") ending on a threatening, and paradoxical, ode to climate change. This one-sided palimpsest convincingly and playfully generates relations between apparently disparate, even opposite, discourses. The blank spaces allow for the flourishing of contingency, in a more literal interpretation of Skinner's concept of "entropology", defined as:

a poetic practise that poises itself between a poetic crafting of language and the effects of chance meaning and association [...] a technique that moves towards a displacement of anthropocentric modes of reading, enabling modes of meaning-generation that result from unforeseen links and possible resonances that must exceed any one human stance. (Clark, 70-1)

If it does not necessarily entail “a displacement of anthropocentric modes of reading”, the humument technique, by shunning completion, linearity and transparency while suggesting infinite possibilities *under* the poem (rather than surging forth from it), does indeed disturb conventional reading practices and expectations. Depending on chance and contingency, the poem is seen as an “open, relational form in which no element is inherently or lastingly central” (Keller, 41), perhaps in the image of the original ecosystem depicted in Well’s Encyclopaedia.

Another form of exploration of disjunction and unexpected concordances, by way of an entirely different formal exercise, is to be found in John Kinsella’s “Eclogue of the Garden 9” (as in “The Science of Life 492”, the numeral suggests, above the usual anthological effect, missing poems and absent links, synecdoche pointing towards a greater yet always incomplete whole). Refusing to restrict the text to one linear narrative (impression reinforced by the necessity to turn over the book to decipher the poem), the division of the poem into two juxtaposed columns, allows for simultaneous double reading on both horizontal and vertical lines, forcing the reader to continually readjust their perception to the “degrees of mutability” exposed in the poem. Conflicting views are revealed by the white chasm in the middle of the poem which complicates reading and meaning – if read vertically, the poem is characterized by disjointedness, contradiction and fruitful random generations of images, if read horizontally it presents a more orderly lyrical discourse, as the first lines show:

The mood can so inflect the garden	as precious water on
precious leaves	
inflects, drags you into the prisms.	Last night a tread in the air
and a beating	
of the house, and even the garden	trembled. I went out in the
dark	
verandah light on	barn owl spread shadow
wings	

Kinsella consistently relies on the pastoral mode which he questions and deconstructs as he deploys it, no less so with the eclogue which, according to him, “allows for conflicting voices to work within a specific framework – a mode that contains difference probably more than it allows it” (148). Wary of analogies and “the stale historicising of gardens/ given, laid out, waiting to be spoiled”, the poet reads the garden against tempting pastoral solace, focusing instead on farming practices and their ecological impact, and offering a critique of colonization and capitalistic land-degradation. The possible double-reading, by creating new relations between lines and words (read vertically, for instance, the hierarchy established between exterior and interior in the horizontal reading, is reversed: “the garden/inflects, drags you into the prisms/of the house”), reinforces the existing thematic interrelations between the microcosm of the garden and massive agribusiness concerns, porous time spans (prehistory and post-industrial Australia), and entwined natural and cultural phenomena such as the “reaching root” and the nuclear flower. Instead of fostering the stability of self, the garden reveals nothing but pollen-like dispersion: “Garden is where soul is tested/ garden is where the ‘I’ will never/recover from accruals disperse/ with pollen from a bolting exception”. Accompanying the thematic and formal play on disjunction and conjunction, congruence and incongruence, the reading experience itself is doubled (potentially even trebled) and disrupted. As such, the poet’s own articulation of derangement (“overwritten with anguish and second guessing”) is successfully transmitted to

the reader, the act of reading becoming, metapoetically, a stepping into the darkness: “I disturbed/ myself with lines from Shakespeare/ Because unfamiliar night sounds/ make you hesitate before stepping/ into darkness”.

By resisting linearity both in the perception of the world they offer and in the poem-object itself, these texts eschew straightforward or standardized representation of the climate crisis. Instead, they insist on the production of random meaning as they foreground issues of disconnection and interconnectedness. In doing so, these texts call for a more material, and more unsettling, reading experience as they focus attention on language and the building blocks of the poem.

IV. “Dense and Darkly”: Lines of Entanglement

In line with the precepts of new materialism, experimental ecopoets have found phenomenological meaning in reinjecting the body into their productions in an effort to highlight our enmeshment with the world. Nuno Marques shows how experimental ecopoets work on the “material aspects of communication” so as to bring the “presence of others’ bodies into the composition [...], creating the perception of a shared materiality” (34) through the use of collage, scientific reports, visual poetry, aggregation of words, or spectrograms as in Skinner’s “Blackbird Stanzas”. In his exploration of “sensuous poesis”, Knickerbocker also insists on a heightened attention to body of the poem in order to mimetically call forth our own embodied participation in human-nonhuman encounters. Rather than human-nonhuman encounters however, the poems discussed here draw attention to the physicality of the poem to insist upon issues of interconnectedness existing between living and non-living things and the more abstract historical phenomena of climate change. In the same movement, by revealing the density and texture of print, thus breaking down the illusory transparency of text, the poems materialize the (often complex and obscuring) mesh of language, as a correlative to the mesh of the world.

Khairani Barokka’s “Fence and Repetition: A History of Climate Change”, mixing both prose and versified poetry, is interesting in this aspect. Working as a palindrome, the poem can be read both ways, generating unexpected semantic links, meanings and obscurities, through repetition and inversion of syntagms. Divided into three parts, the poem offers a (very) compact history of climate change, denouncing the impact of colonization and resource extraction on the welfare of animal species and the planet. The middle part consists of one brief, widely-spaced versified stanza printed in italics, the lyrical impulse (materialized by the slanted cursive) standing out against the two dense prose blocks of colonial “history”. The middle stanza acts thus like lyrical *intermezzo*, materializing the angry and desperate cry of “those above ground and below” who stand against the “steward song” and “mellifluous thinking” characteristic of the prevailing political order. Beyond a mere Oulipian exercise, the poem seeks to delinearize the way we read poetry just as it suggests a potential un-reading of history through its specular layout. The

reversed lines acts as a rejection of the rationalization and standardized measurement of colonization (“divi[ding]”, “sectioning”, “catalogu[ing]”, “breaking”), the “fencing” of land, to quote the title, finding its equivalent in the fencing of language. From “overheated necks” (§1) to “overheated minerals (§3), from “the salty cud of other species” (§1) to “the salty cud of other centuries” (§3), and from “all endings/paused” (§1) / to “all endings/ with cracked hot soil” (§3), the palindromic reversal insists on the unsettling porousness of poetic language. The palindromic effect disrupts linear reading, generating aggramaticalities and obscurities, as the reversed lines of the third paragraph struggle against syntax, attempting to create grammatical and semantic links beyond formal disruption. In doing so, the poet inscribes resistance in the body and the language of the poem, creating a parallel between the unyielding reading experience and the political struggle it calls for.

Similarly interested in the material effects of resistant text, Astra Papachristodoulou’s prose poem “Void” draws on the seemingly everyday device of bold emphasis to thicken the text, enhance its physicality by drawing attention to its building blocks. Although the poem’s title suggests a concern with figuring the “void”, the form insists on textual density and substantiality, materializing varying intensities of scale, tone and image, through the use of boldface:

From soil to isolation. **Horizon to horizon.** As far as the eye can see. **Found it on a hike, getaway, moving like a single vast living creature.** Sometimes greasy, sometimes gore. **Sifting it, sorting it, breathing it.** Observing over its entire decomposition with caution. **Paths leading to piles of debris.** A minute offers local fuels to the void. **Fast-growing surplus of cables cover landscape.** A landfill, a growth, a landfill, a layer. **Waste happens.** In the occasional, without recognition. **Over its vast girth.** The hum of dust, happens. **Contaminated plants, tessellate.** Marching into the foray behind fixated bulldozers. **Objects drawn along and rough, and along.** Turning into clouds of toxic dust. **Silences, against what surfaces.** [...] **Sifting it, sorting it, breathing it.** Amid the junk floating in zero gravity, pungent smell drifts far out along the highway. **Space can be dense, or darkly.**

Papachristodoulou showcases her attempt at giving form to the climate crisis as a “hyperobject”, presented here as a growth, a process happening “in the occasional, without recognition”. The evocation insists on a generalized dynamism driving the poem onwards, highlighted by the frequency of continuous forms (sorting, breathing, observing, leading, growing, marching, turning, floating, etc.). The continuous flux and porousness between states is revealed through techniques of accretion and variation in macro and micro-structural forms – anagrammatic permutation of letters and capitalization, as in the first lines, create mirror-effects: “From soil to isolation. **Horizon to horizon**” (my emphasis). Opposing states of decomposition and generation meld together through repetition and variation (“a landfill, a growth, a landfill, a layer”), just as, syntactically, adjectives and adverbs appear interchangeable (“space can be dense, or

darkly", "objects drawn along and rough"). Juxtaposition and syntactical breaks at the end of lines strikingly isolate verbs ("The green of a circuit-board, catches", "The hum of cable, happens", "contaminated plants, tessellate"). The verbs emerge from the nominal propositions, both joining and disjoining the sentences and generating an overwhelming impression of entropy. Through this confusing mass of interrelated notations, it is never made clear what exactly is the nature of what is being "observed with caution", "as far as the eye can see". The abundance of impersonal pronouns amplify the object's indeterminate status as the poem actively performs the dissolution of limits between natural and artificial, animal and mineral, life and death processes, the intangible and the tangible. Scales collide as the vast and the minute coalesce, creating effects of disproportion and discordance. The uncanniness of the process is heightened by the random patterns of significance established by the use of bold, emphasising lines over others without a clear hierarchy of meaning. The alternating font also underlines the orality of the text, its sonorousness and rhythm. The poem is intended to be vocalized, the bold suggesting a double enunciation, where contrasting volume and (binary, ternary) rhythms, repetition and refrain act like a responsary to the lines in normal type ("Sometimes greasy, sometimes gore. **Sifting it, sorting, breathing it**'). Thus the poem moves beyond the purely representational, pushing the reader to engage sensorially with the flow of notations, the enactment of a process and the performance of the poem itself.

A similar resistance to transparent, linear representation is to be found in poems which concentrate on the aural in order to intensify the materiality of text, as in Andrew Fentham's "Porth". Through an accretion of highly rhythmic, asyntactic notations in free verse, the seascape around Porth is materialized, rather than represented, through sound:

otherwise up droskyn
anyway up droskyn
under armour no doppler
shift the batholith
quiet flemish ledge
breakers breakers on the town
quiet
a fox a badger a bear
quiet among scrambled egg
lichen humid dune slacks

quiet on twelve cist one
dumpy stonechat gear
sand out in ligger bay
towans as gun range
golf club holiday bunkers

piran as bladderwhack scarecrow
piran as half a young porpoise
head half just spine

The sensation of movement induced semantically by the wealth of prepositions (“up”, “up”, “under”) is reinforced by the swift, fractured rhythm of the short lines. Assonance and alliteration, colliding phonemes sometimes difficult to pronounce (“shift the batholith”, “lichen humid dune slacks”), heighten the materiality of the words by marking their physicality in the mouth. The fragmented syntax and absence of capitalization (confusing proper and common nouns), only reinforce the impression of a haphazard assemblage of words and sounds. The repeated, unfamiliar technical, historical and regional nouns (droskyn, batholith, bladderwhack, stonechat, cligga, piran, etc.), because they do not immediately signify, focus attention on their physicality, their aural and visual inscription the page. The short rhythmic lines turn thus into a quasi-babble of sonorous words, generating an abstract, not-quite referential, image of the natural environment. To use Knickerbocker’s distinction, “the immediate, embodied experience of nonhuman nature” (17) is *enacted* rather than merely *represented* through the use of “wild language” (13). Instead of signalling away from itself towards the town of “Porth” it supposedly represents, the poem “exists” in and of itself. By promoting sensory experience over linear representation, the poem favours thus the perceptual over the conceptual engagement of the reader so as to translate our material embeddedness in a world of fragmented yet interrelated things.

V. Artifice and Engagement

The preceding analyses have shown that the poems of the anthology seek to act as a zone of contact, highlighting our interrelation with the world, through a range of formal strategies which focus on the materiality of language and, as a consequence, draw attention to the artifice of poetry and poetic representation. The attention to language, in its “anthropocentric focus on textuality” (Knickerbocker, 2) is rarely considered the purview of ecopoetry and ecocriticism, as it appears to run counter to ecocentric engagement. In effect, the focus on text and textuality has generally been resisted by ecocritics, in a dualist movement which opposes the phenomenological reality of the environment to textuality, language and, ultimately, logocentrism, often seen as one of the causes of our divorce from the “immediate” experience of non-human nature (David Abram). Underneath this fundamental debate, lies the age-old poetic tension between aesthetics and ethics, in which “aestheticism is too often dismissed as a reactionary wolf in the sheep’s skin of apoliticism” (Knickerbocker 4). But reading ecopoetry in the era of the “self-conscious Anthropocene” (Keller) shows differently: the interest in formal strategies, in poetic language and its artifice and self-referentiality, goes hand in hand with, and even appears to reinforce, reader engagement. Its poets are not discouraged by the apparent paradox of believing in the transformative powers of poetry, while playfully highlighting the artifice of their chosen 1.2 em, denying its verisimilitude and transparency and pointing towards

its limitations. Thus, figurative devices such as the trope of “speaking nature”, personification and apostrophe, often dismissed as gross anthropocentric pathetic fallacies, also feature largely in the anthology because they allow a reflection on poetic rhetoric and the construction of the human-nonhuman voice. The poets are thus self-consciously artificial, acutely aware of the 1.2 em and tradition they are writing in and in which they deliberately show themselves groping towards a voice. As the first poem of the anthology confirms in its introduction (“of course poems that start ‘oh this was a dream’ are dull”) the metapoetical tendency is considered an essential feature of contemporary ecopoetry always critical of its own writing processes and preconceptions, foregrounding the textual as it asks the reader to be attentive to its modes of representation.

John Wedgwood Clarke’s “Red River at the A30 Culvert”, is archetypal in this aspect. With this text, the poet earnestly and explicitly aims to set right the lack of poems about “the polluted, post-industrial and ugly” (“Red River”), in short doing his duty “to hold the slimy in view” (Morton, 159) at the same time as he asks for a reconception of nature poetry. Almost paradoxically, in his rejection of traditional nature poetry, the poet uses the highly artificial poetic convention of giving voice to the non-human so as to make the reader “listen to a polluted river⁵”. Horace’s “Fountain of Bandusia” (Ode III, 13), quoted in epigraph (*Fies nobelium tu quoque fontutium* – You too will be famous, stream/[for I celebrate you...]) is the exemplar of a tradition that Clarke seeks here to overwrite. His poem ironically deconstructs Horace’s celebration of the fountain’s purity (only equaled in dignity by the poet’s diction), by giving voice to the polluted culvert, preventing idealization through demystifying realism (devoid of “entablature, columns, mysteries”) as he purposefully collides associations of dirt with purity: “I’m the dirtiest of white noise/Bright as a chlorinated fountain/blowing into the dark down/A waste chute”. By placing the poem under the ironic aegis of Horace’s ode, Clarke is conscious of imagining the voice of the “Red River” through the highly artificial trope of “speaking nature”, using its artificiality to transform the ecological concept of “ecotone” (meetings of biomes) into a metaphor of creative processes where nature and formal traditions meet.

In the same line but with more insistence on self-referential reflection, Jo Clement’s “Wild Camp” engages dialogically with the contradictions of the poetic voice. Breaking down the linearity of the poem, two distinct and competing vocalic spaces are materialized on the page by alternating roman and italic type. This doubling, or modulation, of the speaker’s voice, opposes the conventions of lyric nature poetry (signified by the italics, a “personalising” device in its imitation of manuscript), to the more direct plain style, in which natural environment is not separated from political realities:

To hell with the abbey
we found a place between the pebbles —

*look, a heron by the edges, peripheral
flies over —*

so here we are, bivvied by the Tweed like two rocks
and yeah, I suppose the patriarchy won't have fucked off

The use of italics to figure the “poetic” mode foregrounds the artificiality and obliqueness of conventional poetic speech and the aesthetic distance with nature it implies. The first line “to hell with the abbey” suggests a rejection of Romantic aesthetics (recalling Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”), confirmed in the last stanza by the speaker’s annoyance at the seeming impossibility of “writ[ing]/a poem without a Gypsy in it”. The lyric epiphany, signalled by the dash, intrudes on and interrupts the speaker’s plain speech, calling attention away from the world to a romanticized, picturesque vision of nature (signified by the archetypal, even clichéd images of heron and angler). Typically, the lyrical passages are introduced by the codified vocal address to an unspecified interlocutor: “*look, a heron*”, “*see the angler*”, “*listen, the birds*”. Although the poem highlights the artificiality of conventional nature poetry, it also recognizes itself as a highly artificial construct by foregrounding its own internal divisions. What it rejects is the single-mindedness and exclusionary vision of conventional nature poetry which it opposes to an enmeshed appreciation of the world, where gender and minority rights are intrinsically linked to our understanding and relationship with environment.

Sarala Estruch’s formally innovative list-sonnet, “I Research the Origins of the Modern Rose & Discover”, also explores the relationship between nature and artifice through the deconstruction of an iconic poetic trope and the traditional sonnet form

1. she is a crossbreed
2. of *Rosa chinensis*, *Rosa gigantea* & other species
3. including *Rosa gallica* & *Rosa canina*
4. of which, only the latter, is native to the British Isles
- [...]
7. Flower with a thousand faces, six thousand five hundred
8. tongues & almost as many names

Divided into fourteen numbered lines, the poem provides a botanical description of the rose, its attempt at encyclopaedic objectivity and avoidance of the habitual symbolification of flowers, deliberately derailed by the startling initial personification of the flower (“she”), suggesting an implicit comparison with the poet herself. Exploring the origins of the rose, through a reminder of its links with colonization and globalisation, the rose is shown to be a highly artificial, constructed product. “A flower with a thousand faces”, a “crossbreed”, the rose defies any “native-exotic” dualities (Ryan, 116). In its essential hybridity (signified linguistically by the Latin italics and Chinese logogram), it is as simple as it is a complex, both multiple and unique, constructed through layers of time (“estimated at thirty-five million years old”). The sonnet ends

on a variation of Gertrude Stein's famous recursive phrase, confusing the proper and common noun, unnamings and namings the flower in the same gesture: "13. She becomes what she is/14. □ □ □ □ □, rose." In renewing the trope of the rose by unearthing its cultural roots, the poem invites us to reconsider what makes a flower "natural" and, conversely, what makes a trope "artificial". By exploring what makes a rose a rose, Estruch also asks us to question what makes a sonnet a sonnet. By fragmenting the fixed form into a listicle, and hollowing out the sonnet's dialectic structure, the sonnet itself is revealed as an equally artificial and malleable construct.

Furthering this metapoetic exploration of lyric traditions and forms, Sean Borodale, perhaps inspired by ecologist Aldo Leopold's famous phrase "Thinking like a mountain", stages his struggle to give voice to a mountain in his poem "Air as a Mineral Disturbed":

The voice is a sculptural possibility/ a temporal crystal. / I can feel that
I am growing voice crystals at the verge of a mouth. / I feel them
manifest their cone tips. / [...] I feel the shapes of it/ in the voice
struggling in angles and distance. / I feel the voice in unsurfaced
volumes/ [...] I see the soapy sun. / I cannot see it but through this
rock. / The arbitrary answer is my own. / A reference to no voice. / Long
tunnel. Swirling heating air. Huge giant. / Was it mine, was it ours?

To give voice to a mountain is precisely what Clark calls the "art of the human limit or border" (62). There is indeed, seemingly, nothing less human than minerality, "a stumbling block to anthropocentrism" (Cohen, 6). Yet the speaker suggests a potential melding of bodies in the striking passage from the lyric "I" to the indeterminate article of inert matter within the same line: "I am growing voice crystals at the verge of a mouth". As the poem seeks to materialize the elusive lithic voice, "struggling in angles and distance", it also highlights its own "verges", to use Borodale's term. The limits between poetry and prose are materialized by the inclusion of forward slashes, conventionally used in quotations so as to visualize line-breaks. This simple yet effective device highlights the sutures of the free verse but also seems to imply a succession of unresolved alternatives, inscribing uncertainty in the print itself. It is within this metapoetic awareness that the reader follows the poet's moving away from the human voice towards a "reference to no voice". If the poet's primary aim is ultimately deemed a fallacy or an impossibility ("the arbitrary answer is my own"), it is the poetic struggle to give expression to the inanimate, the "sculptural possibility" in an encounter that defies expectations, that becomes here the metapoetic subject of the poem. In all its highlighted artifice, the poem reminds us, quite simply, that our perception of the non-human can only ever be limited by the anthropocentric forms we use to mediate it.

Conclusion

Despite the threat of apocalypse looming over the collection, the belief in the staying power of poetry and humankind's infinitely potential and versatile expressive capabilities, remains strong, as suggested by the last lines of Teresa Dziegiewicz's "Confluence. *after Standing Rock*": "We know the world end/ is never an end, but always a mouth instead". The image of the mouth, also explored in Sean Borodale's poem, is reminiscent of W.H. Auden's famous, but often only partially-quoted line, "poetry makes nothing happen [...]/ it survives, / a way of happening, a

mouth". If ecopoetry cannot be expected to actively modify entrenched patterns of behaviour, it can however be expected to survive in the ways it affects our body and consciousness, continually interrogating our representations of reality and thus our ways of relating to the world. When poetry disturbs reading practises through formal experiment and expresses a resistance to conventional modes of representation, it can, according to Joan Retallack, "enact interrogations into [the contemporary moment's] most problematic structures" and foster the "investigative engagement" of the reader ("What is Experimental Poetry"). Effectively playing on "estrangement effects" (Gregson) no longer reserved to radically experimental poetry, the poets of the anthology attempt to forge a wide-ranging (and, hopefully, widely-read) model, or standard, of ecopoetry for a time of crisis. Keenly aware of postmodern issues of self-reflexivity, irony, and the failures of language to represent reality, they also earnestly believe in the importance of the political and ethical issues they raise and in the capabilities of poetry to address (if not redress) them. In a genre usually conceived to be chastening, the ecopoetry studied here is unusual in its foregrounding of formal games, poetic artifice and pleasurable (while disruptive) reading effects, over more direct, or severe, modes of representation. This does not, however, encourage the reader to take refuge in textuality's hall of mirrors, but rather tries to re-focus our attention on the world through an emphasis on the materiality of text and, through this, to remind us that the body of the poem, the self and the world act as an organic continuum. A renewed focus on materiality can enchant the world, to use Jane Bennett's term, the intensity of sense perception being also what, in Heideggerian fashion, unconceals and brings forth the world. Thus, even as it deplores, admonishes or warns the reader of impending doom, the climate crisis poetry we have seen here also works against the prevailing modern narrative of disenchantment, offering "moments of enchantment⁶" and potentially "propelling ethical generosity" (Bennet, 3) through its very struggle to give voice to the climate crisis.

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¹ See also Campos, Liliane & Patoine, Pierre-Louis, *Life, Re-Scaled. The Biological Imagination in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Performance*, Cambridge, OpenBook Publishers, 2022.

² The definition of which is complicated, Ian Gregson himself shying away of putting it in so many words, except for the following wide definition he offers: "What marks [poets] as

« mainstream » is their greater adherence to metrical norms and sometimes to conventional forms and their habit of winning prizes or of publishing in magazines like *The London Magazine*, *The London Review of Books et al.* Nonetheless, their poems are sceptical about language, self-reflexive, playful, self-consciously fictive, and deconstruct themselves » (Gregson, 249).

[3](#) A small selection of publications from 2019 onwards: *Planet in Peril* (Isabelle Kenyon, Fly on the Wall Press, 2019), *100 Poems to Save the Earth* (Zoe Brigley, Kristian Evans, Seren Press, 2021), *No other Place to Stand: An Anthology of Climate Change* (Jordan Hamel, Erik Kennedy, Essa Ranapiri, Rebecca Hawkes, AUP, 2022), *Poetry Rebellion* (Paul Evans, Batsford, 2021), *Poetry for the Planet* (Julia Kaylock, Denise O Kagan, Litoria Press, 2021), *Chaos* (Christine de Luca, George Szirtes, Philip Terry, Anna Johnson, Patrician Press, 2020), *California, Fire and Water: A Climate Crisis Anthology* (Molly Fisk, Story Street Press, 2020), without speaking of individual poet's collections, and collections mixing prose and poetry such as *Watch Your Head: Artists and Writers Respond to the Climate Crisis* (Kathryn Mockler, Coach House Books, 2020), or *Open Your Eyes: An Anthology on Climate Change* (Vinita Agrawal, Hawakal, 2020).

[4](#) Tom Philips' *A Humument, A Treated Victorian Novel*, a work in progress spanning from 1966 to 2016, is a hybrid object between a piece of art and transformed novel, created by a process of deletion and reconstruction of the text found in W.H. Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Document* (giving Philips his own title, by a process of letter erasure: *A Human Document*).

[5](#) "Red River; Listening to a Polluted River" is an 18-month research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council led by Dr. John Wedgwood Clarke (University of Exeter).

[6](#) Defined by Bennett as "a surprising encounter, a meeting with something you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition" (5).