

Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne (eds), *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781609385590 (paper); ISBN: 9781609385606 (ebook)

The subtitle of Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne’s edited collection on ecopoetics, “Essays in the Field”, helps to situate the aesthetic and critical stance of the book. As Hume and Osborne write in their introduction, the title invokes experimental US poets of the mid-20th century, in particular Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, whose poetics engaged with conceptions and practices of “field composition” and “composition by field” (p.4). Contemporary poets and critics will catch this reference and will understand it as a critical stance that foregrounds experimental poetics as an antecedent to much of the most interesting and exciting work in ecopoetics today.

Once situated in this “expanded field”, Hume and Osborne outline some of their aims in the edited collection: “to highlight the changing and intersectional nature of ecopoetics as both poetry and critical practice today” and “to invoke a diversity of field-writing practices” (p.5). While a number of recent ecopoetics collections foreground poetry (e.g. Fisher-Wirth and Street 2013; Staples and King 2017), lyrical glossary entries (Russo and Reed 2018), or critical-creative hybrids (Iijima 2010), Hume and Osborne’s goal is to focus primarily on the critical field: “The foremost aim of this book is to perform much-needed work on a rapidly developing critical field – or, alternatively, as our subtitle suggests, to explore the dynamic potential of the essay within that evolving field” (p.5).

The collection includes 11 chapters, presented in four parts, successively titled: “The Apocalyptic Imagination”, “Embodiment and Animality”, “Environmental Justice”, and “Beyond Sustainability”. I can easily imagine these section titles in a contemporary book on critical geographic theory or political ecology; suffice it to say that the collection’s thinking has much overlap with current discussions and research in critical, cultural, and radical geography, as well as the geohumanities and literary geographies.

Opening the section on “The Apocalyptic Imagination”, Lynn Keller reads the poetry of Jorie Graham and Evelyn Reilly in relation to “how apocalypticism shapes politically consequential individual and social affects” (p.21). One of her main questions is whether an apocalyptic notion of the Anthropocene “reinforces feelings of hopeless disempowerment” that “weaken the will toward collective action” (ibid.). Keller concludes her piece arguing that both Graham and Reilly, in their work, “believe that eco-apocalyptic art must offer some kind of revelry or pleasure if it is to help people immersed in ongoing crisis muster the will to avert devastation” (p.41). A critical focus on tone and affect in environmentalism has recently been taken up more in the environmental humanities (for example, see Seymour 2018). This affective register shift could also be also useful for geographers who teach environmental studies courses and want to refrain from teaching gloom and doom “environmental depression” courses (Liverman 2014).

The book’s “Environmental Justice” section opens with the chapter “Toxic Recognition: Coloniality and Ecocritical Attention”, in which Matt Hooley reads the work of Diné poet Sherwin Bitsui through an ecocriticism that incorporates theories of geopolitics, state power, and “the politics of enclosure” (p.147). Situating Bitsui’s work in opposition to an ongoing toxic discourse of settler colonialism, Hooley approaches Bitsui’s poetry as a kind of counter-mapping that “frustrates the colonial absorption of ecology into cartography” (p.161). Situated particularly in the context of drought and, more precisely, environmental representations of drought on the Navajo (Diné) Nation that work hand in hand with an environmentalism of resource scarcity that prioritizes “expert knowledge” over local and traditional knowledge, part of Hooley’s chapter reads as classic political ecology. What stands out is how Hooley is able to merge a close reading of Bitsui’s work, in which he argues that “the speaker and the subjects of the poem are insistently obscured such that the reader’s attention can never quite seep in around familiar attitudes of responsibility, solace, or solidarity” (p.162-163), with political ecology and critical race theory. Hooley’s argument that Bitsui’s work “unfixes us from ready ecocritical enclosures (the book, the canyon, the body, the field, the compass)” (p.163), makes the connection between physical

enclosures of the land and epistemological enclosures of thought and form that are often built out of the same white supremacy, violence, and settler colonialism.

Joan Retallack's "Hard Days Nights in the Anthropocene" blends the author's own critical and creative practices. In this final chapter of the collection, closing out the section "Beyond Sustainability", Retallack includes her own poetry throughout the essay, situating the piece as an "experiment in prosimetrum ... a dialogic genre alternating prose and poetry" (p.229). Through this blended genre, Retallack's chapter is an examination of the epistemological, ethical, and etymological aspects of the proposed geologic epoch of the Anthropocene, or, as she puts it: "This essay explores poetics, poethics, and epistemology of the Anthropocene" (ibid.). Retallack begins by introducing the epoch as the "Anthroposcene", with a section of poetry titled "*ANTHROPOSCENES ANTHROPOSCENTITIES*". The language in the opening is syntactically adventurous (for example, "no immigrant ripple pith inescapable ... transnipple Q: will some of us never be post-Dada/long days nights are hot cold ugly too wet too dry for too many on this planet" [p.228]). While Retellack writes that "the Anthroposcene is a word that ... [she] coined", various scholars, authors, and artists have also taken up the "scene" framing of the Anthropocene (see Lorimer 2017). I'm less interested in tracing the first use of the term and more interested in thinking of this as a kind of convergent evolution across disciplines, which points to the various ways that the concept is mobilized, critiqued, and re-worked. Here, one might also benefit from reading Retallack's piece with Erik Swyngedouw and Henrik Ernstson's (2018) work on the "Anthropo-obScene", which takes to task the troubling depoliticization of the "Anthropocene", or Kathryn Yusoff's (2019) work that politicizes the term and calls out the extractive and racial underpinnings of geology as a discipline. In her chapter, Retallack writes that poetry is "the linguistic laboratory and playground of the improbable" (p.242). Geopoets take note: what better site than poetry to imagine and experiment with alternative radical future thought patterns.

I could very easily have chosen any of the chapters in this excellent book to address here as well. Echoes of critical and/or cultural geography appear throughout the book. A geographer would do well, for example, to read Rob Halpern's interpretation of George Oppen's "geological

imagination” (Chapter 2), replacing “geological” with “geographical” or “spatial”. Halpern asks: “how might a poem enable our capacity to *feel* the present, that is, to encounter the present in a way not already determined by representations whose logic at once arouses and neutralizes our ability to respond?” (p. 46). Halpern’s question points to fertile intersections between eco (and geo) poetics and nonrepresentational theory within geography. In Chapter 3, Jonathan Skinner’s reading of the “visceral ecopoetics” of the poets Charles Olson and Michael McClure is very much geographical; see, for example, the section of Skinner’s essay titled “Proprioception: Placing Logography” (p. 73). While Olson has been read as a key figure in ecopoetics, it’s arguable that his work is more about place and space than it is about ecology, and that Olson should be re-situated as a geopoet. For one more example, in “Toward a Black Hydropoetics”, in the book’s “Embodiment and Animality” section, Joshua Bennett “elaborate[s] a theory of black ecopoetics gone offshore” (p.103). Bennett looks particularly to three poems – Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage”, Melvin Tolson’s “The Sea-Turtle and the Shark”, and Xandria Phillips’s “For a Burial Free of Sharks”, to go offshore. While Bennett places this essay “at the intersections of black studies, animality studies, and ecocriticism” (p.105), much of his essay is also spatial.

In the introduction to a forthcoming collection, *Geopoetics in Practice* (Magrane et al. forthcoming), my co-editors and I have a brief conversation about how one might distinguish between geopoetics and ecopoetics. In the exchange, I propose that much of what is considered under the banner of ecopoetics might be more accurately understood as geopoetics because of its spatial and social underpinnings. That argument could be made for a number of the chapters in Hume and Osborne’s book. No matter: what’s important is that this book makes an important contribution to the environmental humanities, ecocriticism, and poetics, and – in the context of the readership of *Antipode* – has much to offer critical geographers. I hope that many geographers will pick up *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* and read it, and after that go directly to read many of the poems and poets whose work is illuminated in these essays.

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