

Ecopoetry:

Overcoming Anthropocene melancholia in the work of Juliana Spahr and Allison Cobb¹

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MOURNING

Environmental loss and death are constitutive of the current moment of our planet, in which anthropogenic action fundamentally alters its geology and atmosphere. Meteorologist Paul Crutzen popularized the term Anthropocene for this conflation of human and geological history that effaces nature and installs the anthropos at the center of planetary processes. While it has gained currency, the term is criticized for the homogenizing and speciesist rhetoric of human agency that it supports. Andreas Malm's *Capitalocene*, a Marxist critique, situates this current bio-historical moment in the development of capitalism through the transformation and exploitation of nature. Anna Tsing's *Plantationocene* highlights the combination of slave labor, the plantation system, and corporate capitalism. New materialist critique exemplified in Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene* "entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in assemblages –, including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-ashumus," removing the anthropos (2016:101). Fundamentally, these critiques depart from the Anthropocene rhetoric arguing that environmental loss and death is created by constitutive processes of the Anthropocene, rather than being an unintended consequence of it.

Mourning for these losses is common in contemporary North-American ecopoetry. Developed from experimental poetry, ecopoetry examines the fractures caused by natural destruction in language, questioning poetry's capability to mourn and become a regenerative practice. Ecopoetry works with the embodiedness and materiality

of poetry (Hume and Osborne 2018) and the material agency of inorganic elements, the apocalyptic rhetoric of environmentalism, interspecies communication and environmental justice (Keller 2019). Poet Evelyn Reilly sums ecopoetic practice as "an investigation into how language can be renovated or expanded as part of the effort to change the way we think, write, and thus act in regards to the world we share with other living things" (2010:255). For Spahr and Cobb this is also an investigation into the possibilities of overcoming grief through ecopoetry. By explicitly framing the failure of received models of representation within the larger psychological and environmental context of loss and death, both poets point to the work of renovating or expanding language that Reilly suggests, and which is a key element to understand contemporary ecopoetry.

In the introduction to *Well Then There Now*, Spahr explains the move from nature poetry to ecopoetics:

I was more suspicious of nature poetry because even when it got the birds and plants and the animals right it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat. And it wasn't talking about how the bird, often a bird which had arrived [in Hawaii] recently from somewhere else, interacted with and changed the larger system of this small part of the world we live in and on. (2011:69)

Ecopoetry reinscribes these omissions, including colonial history and extractivist practices, to explore troubled relations between members of ecosystems. Thus "the tradition of ecopoetics – a poetics full of systemic analysis that questions the divisions between nature and culture" is distinct from "nature poetry" (Spahr 2011:71). Spahr's collection articulates the different scales and relations of the environmental

crisis with which places are connected. In the collection the poet conveys "place as a dynamic construction resulting from the complex interaction of differentially empowered cultures and from the constant movement of human and other-than-human populations" (Keller 191). The tensions of this dynamic construction evidence how those places are created by conflicting and violent agencies and histories, the knowledge of which effectively disrupts the romanticized representations of the natural world.

"GENTLE NOW,
DON'T ADD TO HEARTACHE"

"Gentle Now" deviates from tropes of a romanticised natural world because nature "as the figurative resource that regulates the mourning process" is no longer available and reparative action is deemed impossible, generating melancholia (Ronda 2014:96). The fourth section of this poem rereads pastoral connections with nature in the light of contamination:

It was not all long lines of connection and utopia.
It was a brackish stream and it went through
the field beside our
house.
But we let into our hearts the brackish parts of
it also.
Some of it knowingly.
We let in soda cans and we let in cigarette butts
and we let in pink
tampon applicators and we let in six pack of
beer connectors and
we let in various other pieces of plastic that
would travel through
the stream.
And some of it unknowingly.
We let the runoff from agriculture, surface
mines, forestry, home
wastewater treatment systems, construction
sites, urban yards,

and roadways into our hearts.
 We let chloride, magnesium, sulfate, manganese, iron, nitrite/
 nitrate, aluminum, suspended solids, zinc, phosphorus, fertilizers,
 animal wastes, oil, grease, dioxins, heavy metals and lead go
 through our skin and into our tissues.
 We were born at the beginning of these things, at the time of
 chemicals combining, at the time of stream run off.
 These things were a part of us and would become more a part of us
 but we did not know it yet. (Spahr 2011:130–1)

The material meaning of connection is created by the "cigarette butts ... pink tampon applicators ... six pack of beer connectors and ... various other pieces of plastic" that visibly connect the place by the stream to other places. Bodies, human and others are here penetrated by "oil, grease, dioxins, heavy metals," thus rereading the aesthetic connection with the natural as a relation of contamination. The third section celebrates the communion and connection between the "we" of the poem and the river: "We immersed ourselves in the shallow stream. We ... let the water pass over us and / our heart was bathed in glochida and other things that attach to the flesh" (Spahr 2011:128). The transcendent is substituted by the immediate: the hearts no longer hold God, but runoff and chemicals. Still "we noticed enough to sing a lament" writes the poet, directing the reader to the elegiac mode of the poem, a lament, which because emptied of the generative power of nature cannot heal and overcome melancholia.

The elegiac mode of the poem develops from the powers of song to expand on the possibilities of ecopoetry to overcome melancholia and promote environmental action in poets and readers. The third sec-

tion addresses song thematically, recounting what the "we" of the poem sang, and structurally, as the refrain "gentle now ... don't add to heartache" adds rhythm and repetition. The first line of the song is followed by the animals, plants, and insects of the river named in the previous section:

And as we did this we sang.
 We sang gentle now.
 Gentle now clubshell,
 don't add to heartache.
 Gentle now warmouth, mayfly nymph,
 don't add to heartache.
 Gentle now willow, freshwater drum, ohio pigtoe,
 don't add to heartache.
 Gentle now walnut, gold fish, butterfly, striped fly larva,
 don't add to heartache.
 Gentle now black fly larva, redbreast dace, tree-of-heaven, orange-foot pimpleback, dragonfly larva,
 don't add to heartache. (Spahr 2011:128–9)
 ...
 Gentle now, we sang,
 Circle our heart in rapture, in live-ache. Circle our heart. (Spahr 2011:130)

In the fourth section, the "we" sing of the loss of the animals, plants and birds of the river:

in lament for whoever lost her elephant ear lost her
 mountain madtom
 and whoever lost her butterfly lost her harelip sucker
 and whoever lost her white catspaw lost her rabbitsfoot
 and whoever lost her monkeyface lost her speckled chub
 and whoever lost her wartyback lost her ebonyshell
 and whoever lost her pirate perch lost her ohio pigtoe lost her
 clubshell. (Spahr 2011:131)

Finally, in the fifth section this lament, that had a redeeming role in mourning, is silenced, and the connection is lost:

What I did not know as I sang the lament of
 what was becoming lost
 and what was already lost was how this loss
 would happen.

I did not know that I would turn from the
 stream to each other.

...

I turned to each other.

...

And I did not sing.

I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged to-
 gether, oi.

I did not sing groaning words.

I did not sing o wo, wo, wo!

I did not sing I see, I see.

I did not sing wo, wo! (Spahr 2011:133)

Singing structures the poem in different ways. In the third section the song punctuates the poem celebrating diversity and communion, in the fourth, loss leads to lament, and the poem finishes by acknowledging that permanent mourning can lead to inaction, or silence, when singing is most needed. While the poem seems to leave the reader and the poet in that state of "guilty recognition that cannot lead to reparative action," it also indicates what that action would be by stating what the poet did not accomplish (Ronda 2014:2).

The song that the poet is unable to sing is an ululation like Cassandra's cry in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. Cassandra is taken by madness and speaks unintelligibly in another tongue or only in syllables (otototoi).² It is from this moment of pain in which language is not enough that language also displays its powers of relationality. In Cassandra's speech the relation is with the dead, in ecopoetry it is with others who might read/listen to the poem/song and with the others who died. The poem signals the possibilities of ecopoetry in environmentally disrupted times: a poetry that starts from unintelligible languages, and that has to make poetry unintelligible

again, forced out of forms and linguistic structures by the bio-historical context.

If for Spahr, poetry becomes unintelligible because the poet as seer, the poet as Cassandra, moves out of herself because of agony, such as language and sound move out of structures and meaning because of agony, how can it be a call for action? Here Spahr's *Misanthropocene: 24 Theses* (2014), written with Clover, is instructive. The misanthropocene is an epoch of decentering the relation with the planet from the human. The theses try to make their readers move beyond their desires or despair and take environmental action, becoming misanthropes. Knowing about the "sheer scale of the misanthropocene [makes] our minds feel small and inert" and therefore generates a form of "West melancholy," a comfortable lack of will to act. Because of nostalgia, western culture "makes endless small plastic representations of the African jungle or plains animals and fish ingest them and vomit them up or don't and there they sit in their stomachs and then they die" (Clover & Spahr 2014:4). The plastic copies of animals that risk extinction because of the industry that builds them are products of a form of nostalgic relation with the world. They evoke a symbolic nature while destroying the organic, living models for it. Being aware of the scale of environmental destruction caused by the cultural constructions of nature brings a sense of incapability to act, a melancholia.

In *Misanthropocene*, ecopoetry is one of the ways to build alternative narratives to this destruction and promote different types of action. The final thesis reads: "This is how the misanthropocene ends. We go to war against it. My friends go to war against it. They run howling with joy and terror against it". This call for action is

followed by examples of direct action against the extractive industries (oil, gas) and the military complex, introduced by the injunction "here is how to" (set an oil well on fire, take out the electrical grid), finishing with the statement: "Twenty-fourth of all. Here is how to kill a policeman here is how to abolish culture here is how to knock down a Boeing AH-64D Apache Longbow here is how to loot a grocery store here is how to levitate the Pentagon." (Clover & Spahr 2014:9) As the thesis progresses it becomes clear that the "here is how to" refers to the writing of the theses themselves and that it is a part of an integral artistic ethics of living and writing committed to the planet and the environment: an ecopoetics. Here the authors dramatize the action taken to include direct action and sabotage, thus claiming for ecopoetry the same possibility of direct intervention in the cultural and material structures of the Anthropocene.

AFTER WE ALL DIED

The connection between the Anthropocene, catastrophe and trauma is represented by the need to learn to live with (environmental) death in the works of Allison Cobb, which becomes a possibility rather than a condemnation. Cobb takes this melancholia as the subject of *After We All Died* (2016), her most recent collection of poems. In the poem "You were born" we read:

maybe more insidious forms of
poison have invaded all of us alive on the
planet, plant,
human, and animal, and one poison is
how we know we
kind of want that
melancholy that lets we who are wealthy

in the West
relax into our sadness about the end
of all the stuff we destroyed without
knowing or trying (Cobb 2016:99).

This willingness to experience melancholy is described as a poison, on the same level as radiation from the nuclear industry, as plastics, lead and chemicals. In this sense, fighting melancholy is an environmentally responsible act. As in the *Theses*, melancholy is diagnosed as a sign of its time, and overcoming it is learning how to live in the Anthropocene, and for the poet, creating an ecopoetics:

This is our death. We share it, we who come after the future. With our bodies we nurse our machine that killed us. We give it all of our words. We give it our births to continue, and we who live in privilege: we devour the births out of everything else. The task of such selves is not to live. It is to refuse all the terms of this death into which we were birthed. Maybe then, learning to be dead, something can live. (Cobb 2016:107).

I read "learning to be dead" as learning how to inhabit fully the contemporary biosocial moment of the planet, which demands an ability to relate with its present condition. But does this mean that the Anthropocene is a time of mourning? If the acknowledgement of the many deaths that compose this epoch is present in every action, what does it do to the writing of poetry? And do poets fully inhabit the contemporary biosocial moment? To "refuse all the terms of this death into which we were birthed" is to move one step further from an ecopoetry of elegy for the dead because elegy might be "a form of relaxing into our sadness about the end / of all the stuff we destroyed without knowing or trying" (Cobb 2016:99) – a melancholia.

In "You Were Born," Cobb also explicitly engages with the idyllic representations of nature of the pastoral by changing the focal point toward the suffering they hide:

They come to breed
in shallow seas each spring
in the bay of Delaware, named for the Lord
De la Warr. So the crabs crowd up
in the bay to breed beneath the new
and full moons in the months of May and June,
and the watermen –
the watermen wade in, grab them by the shell
and toss them on trucks
to a lab where lab
people strap them to a steel table, insert a needle
to the heart, drain 30% of the blood,
and send them back to the water of the war
(Cobb 2016:95–6)

The shortcomings of the representation of the idyllic setting of the bay in the full moon period with the crabs breeding are revealed to the reader. The unseen suffering of animals and human workers beneath the surface of that representation is made clear as the poem progresses. Showing the "bulldozer of the side of the road," that Spahr pointed out Cobb focalizes our attention on the suffering to which the crabs are subjected and the relation between that suffering from exploitation and the medical industry that it serves. All this suffering and death opens a wound that transforms ecopoetry into an investigation in language on how to change representations of humans and non-humans, to promote connections and acknowledgement of the suffering of others, rather than naturalizing those deaths or glossing over them while the full moon rises in the idyllic bay.

In Cobb's work we see this wound become the poem's central concern affecting its structure and form. In the collection *After We All Died*, cancer and the death of others break the discursive line. "You were

born," was written after *Misanthropocene*. In the poem, Cobb shows melancholia as an emotional value of merchandise. She is led to YouTube videos of advertisements for sandals named melancholia, and away from the poem's focus on the fear of death, and the "new mode of poetry / called West Melancholy" (2016:93). West Melancholia is this moment of recognizing entanglements between the sandals and the immense networks of production and distribution and their environmental impact, while enjoying the sandals' beauty. This is the perspective of consumers, who can meditate on the implications of their sources of pleasure. As Cobb writes, melancholy "lets we who are wealthy in the West /relax into our sadness about the end /of all the stuff we destroyed without knowing or trying"(2016:99). It is a luxury that underpaid workers and populations in areas afflicted by production and disposal cannot have.

Cobb returns to YouTube later in the poem when exploring the idea of poison and contamination, which leads her to think about horseshoe crabs, whose blue blood is used to measure contamination of plastic prosthetics. After watching documentaries about sandals and the industry around the crabs' blood, she acknowledges that she "did not mean for this to be a poem / about horseshoe crabs and caged booties" (2016:96). Cobb's digression into the relation between the blood of horseshoe crabs and people whose prostheses were checked for bacterial contamination by the use of that blood, highlights the relation between human and non-human bodies and suffering. Later, after exploring how the crabs in those videos are portrayed as donors of blood, not as subjects of exploitation, Cobb sees herself being caught in a form of melancholy contra-

dicting the direction of poem again: "I meant to end this poem with a tight / metaphor about the band Poison from the eighties" (2016:98). The metaphor could not be written because the death of the crabs does not leave space for adding layers of representation of suffering. Ecopoetry, therefore, is called to negotiate and question language, by grounding ecopoetic practices in an ethical commitment to the deaths of others. Here, I understand Cobb to be directing the reader toward the starting point of her ecopoetry and the result of "learning how to die". Cobb later writes: "So I am failing / at this poem. But maybe failure / is a good place to dwell" (2016:99). Perhaps we can extend this starting point to ecopoetry in general. Embracing failure, then, is a way in which ecopoetry takes the Anthropocene as an opportunity and a challenge.

To acknowledge a poetry of failure implies hope in the possibilities of poetry to contribute to better relations with humans, nonhumans and other organisms, hope for an ecologically better future, for environmental justice, for the creation of beauty. And so, here at this point of conflict, in the Delaware bay, as crabs, watermen, birds, and trucks relate violently with each other I turn to Donna Haraway's *Staying With the Trouble*. In this book, she argues that we must acknowledge the tension of the paradox, the failure of previous models, the failures and the possibilities of poetry, as a starting point for action. Inhabiting its paradox is more vital, as Spahr and Clover argue in the *Misanthropocene* than inhabiting West Melancholia, and become trapped in mourning. But can someone act against this comfortable numbness? Ecopoetry can act through a language of inarticulation, that displays the agony of the current bio-historical

moment and pushes language out of inherited forms of representing nature. It is through this disruption, when the immense scale of the environmental crisis takes hold and inhibits action, that the agonistic cry becomes a source of energy and renovation. In Spahr's poem, inarticulation leads to overcoming of mourning: a new language is needed. In Cobb's poem the wound of death opens up failure as a starting point. This is where I situate the role of ecopoetry in the environmental crisis: as a practice of researching language for ways of articulating connections between humans, nonhumans and others, connections that move beyond the anthropocentric perspective of inherited models of representing nature. Taking up the *Misanthropocene's* example of ecopoetry as direct action we can also say that ecopoetry moves one step beyond elegies for the dead of the Anthropocene. There is a vitality in this movement: living with these continuous deaths, the poets bring readers and poems closer to the dead, to the idea of other deaths, and therefore might inspire the desire to stop future deaths. Ecopoetry then, is a practice of staying with failure, and with the dead by acknowledging the complexity of relations of the Anthropocene and, with care, learn to live with them with the hope that, as Cobb writes "learning to be dead, something can live" (2016:107). This wound of the knowledge of death is a standpoint for writing ecopoetry that reflects on the entanglements between ecopoetry and the Anthropocene.

As the work of Cobb, Spahr and Clover shows, ecopoetry explores ways of overcoming grief through experimentation in language and activist practice. *Misanthropocene* relates to Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 1976 "Populist Manifesto" illu-

minating the tradition of poetic interventions it follows. As Ferlinghetti writes: "Poets, come out of your closets [...] / no time now for our paranoias & hypochondrias, / no time now for fear & loathing, / time now only for light & love". By becoming part of a larger movement of change in the environmental imagination, both works perform poetry's role in history, politics and social change.

NOTES

- ¹ A rewritten and extended version of this text is published in Marques, Nuno *Atmospheric and Geological Entanglements: North American Ecopoetry and the Anthropocene*. Umeå Studies in Language and Literature 43. Department of Language Studies, Umeå University, 2020.
- ² See Yopie Prins' "OTOTOTOI: Virginia Woolf and 'The Naked Cry'" for a description of the scene and the question of language.

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SUMMARY

Ecopoetry - Overcoming Anthropocene Melancholia in the work of Juliana Spahr and Allison Cobb

(Ekopoesi - Att övervinna "Anthropocene Melancholia" i Juliana Spahrs och Allison Cobbs verk)

Traditionally, elegy moves from loss to consolation by framing death within larger regenerative cycles of nature. But in the current time of ecological disruption, nature as regeneration is no longer available, and this absence hinders the process of mourning, not allowing consolation. In parallel, the large scale of the environmental crisis creates a sense of futility of action. Both the inability to overcome mourning and the lack of will to act for environmental change create a permanent state of grief that Juliana Spahr, Joshua Clover and Allison Cobb term West Melancholia. How can ecopoetry overcome the process of mourning for lost ecosystems and species, and instead contribute to action? I propose that in contemporary North-American ecopoetry, consolation is given by poetic research in language and activist engagement. Spahr's "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache" (2011) and *Misanthropocene: 24 Theses* (2014), co-authored with Clover, tie grief to the failure of inherited models of representing nature and instead suggest consolation in ecopoetry as activist practice. Cobb's *After We All Died* (2016) grounds consolation in a practice of starting from failure to researching language for modes of overcoming grief. I discuss these works to uncover the poets' proposals of overcoming melancholia through exploration of language and engaged activist writing.

Keywords: ecopoetry, mourning, elegy, melancholia, activism.

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