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Book Review: David Farrier's *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*

by Killian Quigley



About the Author

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Book Review

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The power of the Anthropocene concept, writes David Farrier, consists in crystallizing connections between apparently disparate materials, relations, lives, and times. So doing, it behaves a bit like poetry. That resemblance is at the heart of this agile book, which identifies and interprets consequential affinities among Modernist and avant-garde Anglophone poetics and the theoretical affordances of (primarily) Western environmental humanities scholarship. Of all the Anthropocene's manifold disruptions, Farrier argues, the most urgent may derive from its "complex, paradoxical temporality"—from its habit, that is, of confronting human subjects with a "poignant sense that our present is in fact accompanied by deep pasts and deep futures" (6). When poems experiment with time's functions, and reimagine how temporalities relate, they express their power to "reveal the flux of scales that enfold us" (127) in deep (and other) times. Poetry may not save the world, but it does a great deal more (*pace* W. H. Auden) than nothing when it lends "shape and form" to the knotty material, imaginative, and ethical crises that characterize our moment (127).

By asking what poetry does, and might do, to cultivate an "Anthropocenic sensibility" (15), *Anthropocene Poetics* chimes with robust, growing, and diverse fields of ecocritical and eco poetic practice. The "self-conscious Anthropocene" is Lynn Keller's useful formulation for a momentous "cultural phenomenon" that is taking place—and inciting poetic response—whether or not the International Commission on Stratigraphy settles the matter geologically (2018, 1–2). Some theories of what such response might achieve are inspiringly visionary. "We have too many antecedents haunting our representations," writes Isabel Sobral Campos, "so poetry, especially in its care for language, may begin to reset those antecedents to alter the facts of our living" (2019, x).

This strong sense of poetic potential springs in part from etymological attunement. *Poiesis* is a Greek word meaning “to make,” so *ecopoiesis*, which Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola give as “homemaking,” suggests a generative capacity that operates across not just text and art but “activism and justice work” (2018, 138). These sanguine, flexible accounts reflect the necessary thinking of scholars keen to articulate what poetry can *actually* contribute to the work of designing better socio-ecological futures.

Farrier is somewhat more circumspect. Poetry’s promise, in this account, is not so much transformative—let alone architectonic—as it is revelatory. The world’s temporal and relational “knottedness,” for example, is not a condition poetry brings into being but one that it helps bring to awareness (121). In this instance, Farrier has adapted his knotty figures from the writings of Deborah Bird Rose, Thom van Dooren, and Donna Haraway, scholars whose work has helped give shape to the field of the environmental humanities. This exchange emblemizes the book’s broader scheme, which is to detect and unpack the intertextures of “Anthropocene studies” and “Anthropocenic poetics” (8). That poetics takes in, but is not confined to, the writings of contemporary poets who adopt the layered environmental disasters of our era as their explicit subjects. *Anthropocene Poetics* also performs creatively anachronistic readings of older poems that might not fit within the coordinates of the self-conscious Anthropocene but that anticipate and add depth to an Anthropocenic sensibility. “*Anthropocene Reading*” could have served as another fitting title for this undertaking, which interleaves poetic and environmental-humanist languages so as to make vivid their significant resonances.

As the vehicle *par excellence* of individual expression and address, lyric poetry would seem to face a hard task amidst the Anthropocene’s temporal and scalar disorientations. How is the poetic subject supposed to reckon and represent these conceptual and historical complexities and immensities? Farrier’s first chapter, “Intimacy: The Poetics of Thick Time,” rescues the lyric from possible precarity by arguing that its modalities are in fact unusually suited to “a present so intruded upon by deep pasts and deep futures” (17). Invoking the feminist theorists Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, the artist Ilana Halperin, the ecocritic Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and the geographer Kathryn Yusoff, Farrier identifies thickened times and geologic intimacies—a “sympathy with the lithic” (18)—in the poems of two canonical twentieth-century writers, the Massachusetts-born Elizabeth Bishop and the Irish Nobel Prize laureate Seamus Heaney. With Bishop and Heaney, lyric utterance works athwart anthropocentrism to open unexpected imaginative and affective relations with stones, strata, fossil fuels, and other entities besides. For Farrier, this distinctly “queer” tendency is not only aesthetic but epistemological: as an organ of “viscous experience,” lyric poetry has the capacity to mobilize a reevaluation of categories of interiority and exteriority, life and nonlife (18–20).

Bishop, Farrier explains, produced an oeuvre that was not only receptive to but constituted by “negotiation” among apparently incommensurable scales and textures (28). Her poems reflect this in at least two ways: first, Bishop’s exquisite attentiveness to detail does not distract from, but conduces *to*, a sense of interconnection and temporal depth. This “Darwinesque” practice does not simply identify its objects of regard and categorize them into expanding scientific schemata (27). Rather, through considered acts of verbal and formal repetition, Bishop confirms the presence of irreducible difference within the apparently similar. For Farrier, the coincidence of likeness and unlikeness, and the co-presence of seemingly incongruous scales, also typify Heaney’s perceptual achievement. *Tri na cheile* (or *trina chéile*), a semi-translatable Irish phrase connoting a state of being “through-other,” animates Farrier’s impression of Heaney as a poet of the “richly enfolded” (34). Widely known for engaging with the strange, erotic, and sometimes terrible energies of peat bogs, Heaney also maintained a keen concern for the geologic, and it is to this feature of his poetry that Farrier turns. By orienting himself, famously, toward sensuous—and particularly haptic—encounters with the stuff of the world and the traces of time, Heaney joins Bishop in affirming human (and more-than-human) bodies as primary sites of geologic intimacy.

Environmental literatures have long, and at times impactfully, served planetary ecologies by articulating their wonders and lamenting their debasements. In the Anthropocenic moment, however, a sense grows that elegy and critique are not adequate to reckon the wreckage of what the feminist ecophilosopher Val Plumwood called the “shadow places” of Western society’s “consumer self” (2008, 147). In his second chapter, “Entangled: The Poetics of Sacrifice Zones,” Farrier engages two living poets who reach toward, and help configure, novel poetic registers. They are Peter Larkin, the prolific English versifier of industrial arboriculture, and Evelyn Reilly, the polymathic U.S.-American writer whose work has rapidly become a fascination of ecopoetic and environmental-humanist thinkers. In addition to the journalist and activist Naomi Klein, whose concept of capitalist sacrifice zones helps form the chapter’s subtitle, Farrier’s foremost interlocutors in this case are the anthropologist Anna Tsing and the feminist science studies scholar Karen Barad. Tsing’s theory of the colonial and postcolonial Plantationocene ironizes capitalism’s claims to simplify and commoditize the world when it shows how thriving and indeterminate relations emerge even from ostensibly blasted landscapes. Larkin and Reilly animate such relations through a poetics that Farrier calls, borrowing from Barad, “diffractive” (55): these poets gather their materials into unruly wholes that do not so much name or describe as *stage* the phenomena they treat.

Larkin's midlands plantations cut unlikely, and latently subversive, figures across English traditions in landscape poetics. Through Farrier's superb readings, these poems effect a practice, and a form, of "hovering sense"—of lingering alertly with the histories and "relational possibilities" that exist even in supposedly diminished and homogenized plantation-scapes (59). On the page, Larkin's language appears in "scalable blocks" that belie the linguistic and associative eccentricities they contain (58). Thus a poetic *enactment* of the Tsingian ironies that subtend the Plantationocene, and of the diffractive emergings that it may be possible to detect in its atmospheres. Similarly, Reilly's poetics of thermo- and other plastics does not simply treat its subjects as objects to be identified and assessed. Instead, her poems admit a kind of polymeric "principle," forming and reforming "chains of associations" (75–7) in ways that trouble easy distinctions between humankind and the slow violences—and increasingly deep times—of anthropic waste. Reilly's and Larkin's adaptive, "open field" poetics generate works which partly relinquish poetic control to what Farrier, borrowing from Barad, calls their and their subjects' plural, "intra-active" agencies (72).

Such relinquishment is as formally exciting as it is ethically complex: if there is much to be gained by decentering human subjects within the domain of poetic utterance, what else is at risk of being lost? The possibilities of a more-than-human, and indeed multispecies, poetics come even more squarely into focus in Farrier's third and final chapter, "Swerve: The Poetics of Kin-Making." Channeling (by way of Lucretius) the atomism of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, Farrier adopts the figure of the clinamen, a turning or inclining that imbues an otherwise orderly system with elements of freedom and uncertainty. Here, the swerve is a metaphor for and a praxis of Haraway's influential call for "kin-making" (89), as well as of Rose's ethic of estranging the self through attunement with an other. Farrier would have us recognize some of poetry's fundamental affordances—namely metaphor, apostrophe, and citation—as unusually suited to acknowledging and mobilizing these entanglements. He illustrates these claims via readings of three contemporary writers: the U.S.-American poet Mark Doty, the London-born writer and artist Sean Borodale, and the Canadian experimentalist Christian Bök. The stakes of these readings are high, for their context is the monumental unraveling of kinship ties that some call the Sixth Extinction, a catastrophe that Farrier understands as "[pitching] us into deep time: into awareness of the richness of our inheritance from the deep past, and the depleted legacy we will leave to the deep future" (92).

What these swervings share is a porous *poiesis* which situates the human writer as only one amidst a tangle of what we might call poetic agents. Doty's "Difference" (1995) apostrophizes jellyfish, creatures that, as Farrier rightly points out, are weirdly, simultaneously intimates and aliens to humanness. On the one hand, they are special

emblems of anthropogenic environmental change; on the other, and as Doty's poem demonstrates, they frustrate identification to the point of setting in motion a kind of interminable metaphoric chain. More-than-human authorship is still more explicitly at stake in Borodale's *Bee Journal* (2012), a sequence of "lyrigraphs," or quasi-documentarian, on-the-spot poems that reflect, and are in a sense co-composed by, innumerable apian others (Farrier 101). Like "Difference," *Bee Journal* does not bridge the interspecies divide so much as stay with its trouble through ambivalent, generative acts of what Farrier, adapting Harold Bloom, illuminatingly calls "multispecies misprision" (106). The collaborative web becomes stranger still in Bök's ongoing *Xenotext*, a kind of infinite poem created through and with the genome of *Deinococcus radiodurans*, an "extremophile bacterium" that appears to be impossible to kill (110). Bök's experiment has received extensive critical attention, not all of it admiring, and Farrier's aim, here, is partly to defend its worth as a sincere, lively, and "uncanny" turn toward the estranging strangeness of microbial poets (113).

Anthropocene Poetics traces its networks of correspondence with loving care. So doing, it not only reveals but multiplies the sympathies that sound among ecopoetry and the environmental humanities. Listening for these resonances can, of course, mean unhearing others, and I leave this valuable book wondering how best to assemble an archive for Anthropocene reading that preserves historic and cultural difference *among* its subjects while also illustrating their mutualities. And I remain particularly compelled and unsettled by the knotty problems raised by Farrier's treatment of shadow places: what spaces remain for the essential ethical work of critique if we revalue devastated environments as sites not of sacrifice but of "renewed relationality"? (86) This book does the vital work of (re)opening these and many other concerns, and of confirming the importance—and the difficulty—of poetics for Anthropocenic times. Among its readings, and between those and the many kin it keeps, *Anthropocene Poetics* conjures a host of irregular, reorienting, and deeply timely interchanges—and these are precious gifts indeed.

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