Out of Time: Poetry from the Climate Emergency

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The anthology *Out of Time: Poetry from the Climate Emergency* features fifty poems by fifty poets that speak of, and from, a time of ecological collapse. Two epigraphs set the tone of the collection. The first, by Greta Thunberg, asserts the moral imperative of speaking out 'in clear language'. The second, by Anne Carson, speaks both to the urgency of our current situation and to the suitability of poetry for engaging with crisis: 'If prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it.' Carson's image of a man on fire is an apt choice for a collection that grapples with environmental devastation and questions of agency and action via a range of poems that vary in form. Rather than seeking to critique individual poems, this review will consider the conceptual framework of the book and reflect on its role in climate activism and social change.

Out of Time merits sequential and sustained reading. The reader finds echoes, dialogues and motifs that accumulate over the course of the pages. We encounter recurring images of rivers and water systems that flow across the collection's pages: 'you / cast me away like rubbish as if / I were not part of you. How you shove me / under, naked, a dying river god' *(*John Wedgwood Clarke, 'Red River at the A30 Culvert', 42); 'And what is there to do now but love this unfinished work / of the river, carrying everything it has ever been / given [...] We know the word end / is never an end, but always a mouth instead.' (Teresa Dzieglewicz, 'Confluence after Standing Rock', 44*).*

What does it mean to think of the word ‘end’ as a mouth? A mouth consumes. A mouth also speaks. A mouth kisses, and a mouth breathes. A river’s mouth is the place where it enters a larger body of water. Poetry offers us a different way of knowing, of constructing and inhabiting meaning via the ‘building blocks [...] of rhetoric, meter, rhythm, rhyme, metaphor and imagery’ (Out of Time, 22). This permits new perspectives and ways in to engaging with issues that may feel overwhelming in scale. Philosopher Timothy Morton proposes: ‘Reading a poem is a wonderful exercise in learning how not to be conned by propaganda [...] That’s because a poem makes it very uncertain exactly what sort of way you are supposed to hold the idea it presents [...] Reading a poem introduces some wiggle room between ideas and ways of having them. Propaganda closes this space down’ (Morton 2018, 74). Poetic ambiguity can be understood as a literary tool, encouraging the reader to think critically and to embrace uncertainty.

In her introduction, editor Kate Simpson writes: ‘Ecowriting, for as long as it is recognised as a sub-category or genre of literature, 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’ (Out of Time, 20). She posits that literature has a vital role in dismantling harmful structures and creating new ones. I would agree with her claims that the anthology ‘cannot be a solution...But it can do *something*’ (20), and that ‘the restorative properties of linguistics’ (22) have a pivotal role in social change. Despite this, I personally feel we should protect the right of a poem to simply be a poem and liberate art from the need to fix, heal or otherwise save the world, thereby letting its transformative powers work in subtler and less overtly political and didactic ways. That having been said, can such a stance be defended in the face of existential threat?

We encounter numerous images of, and odes to, trees in the book: ‘mandala of wood, atlas of the imperilled world, shield against the weather’ (Linda France, ‘Giant Sequoia’, 69); ‘What would the trees say about us? / What books would they write / if they had to cut us down?’ (Raymond Antrobus, ‘Silence / Presence’, 76); ‘For each tree is an altar to time [...] For how each leaf traps light as it falls. / For even in the nighttime of life / it is worth living, just to hold it’ (Seán Hewitt, ‘Leaf’, 126). In her poem ‘#ExtinctionRebellion’, Pascale Petit juxtaposes the living world with human technologies via hybrid imagery: ‘an apiary of apps’, ‘wood wide web’ – and an image that evokes rhizomatic mycelium networks as emblematic of activism: ‘Underground / where resistance is in progress - / fungal friends working in darkness, / their windows blacked out’ (78). Potent linguistic imagery inspires a quality of attention to and care for the environment. However, on reading these poems the reader may wonder if by writing about trees, mushrooms and insects, poets are using the living world to write about themselves, and whether this could be considered another form of extraction. Timothy Morton believes ‘humans are traumatized by having severed their connections with nonhuman beings, connections that exist deep inside their bodies’ (Morton, 76). This severance is evident in the dualistic notion of ‘nature’ as something external to human beings. Is it possible to write about or even from the imagined perspective of other species, or does all writing emanate from a necessarily anthropocentric position? Reflections on issues of cognition and perspective are present in poems such as ‘god complex (excerpt)’ by Rachel Allen: ‘I intellectualize the sky / that feels like it’s opening up / but that is just my mind’ (66), and ‘Blue Morpho, Crypsis’ by Fiona Benson: ‘trying to find a poem / in this butterfly’s blue sheen’ (65). These poems suggest a detached and solipsistic

conception of consciousness that reaches to the sky, the butterfly, as a means of shoring up the self.

In her book 'The Mushroom at the End of the World', anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing insightfully finds links between cultural, social and economic narratives:

> But how does one tell the life of the forest? We might begin by looking for drama and adventure beyond the activities of humans. Yet we are not used to reading stories without human heroes... Can I show landscape as the protagonist of an adventure in which humans are only one kind of participant? Over the past few decades many kinds of scholars have shown that allowing only human protagonists into our stories is not just ordinary human bias. It is a cultural agenda tied to dreams of progress through modernization (Tsing 2015, 155).

Tsing illuminates the ways in which human-centric stories reveal ideologies and hierarchical narratives that support an exploitative relationship with the more-than-human world. This speaks to the urgency of eco-literature and volumes such as *Out of Time* as a mode of repair, a method of engaging with and shifting the conditioning (and language) that sustains the status quo. The introduction to *Out of Time* situates the book in the 'throes of the Anthropocene' (14) a term that was popularised by atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to highlight the significant impacts of human behaviour on the global environment. The word Anthropocene supports a view of humans as inherently destructive and implicates *people* rather than *economic systems* as the drivers of climate crisis. It has been critiqued by many thinkers, including Donna Haraway, writer on the interrelation of nature and culture, who claims: '[The Anthropocene] feeds into some extremely conventional and ready-

to-the-tongue stories that need far more critical inquiry. The figure of the anthropos itself is a species term. The anthropos—what is that? ... All of mankind? Well, who exactly?' (Haraway, 2015, 233). Haraway posits the term *Capitalocene* as a more suitable name for our era of capitalistic extraction:

> The mass extinction events are related to the resourcing of the earth for commodity production, the resourcing of everything on the earth, most certainly including people, and everything that lives and crawls and dies and everything that is in the rocks and under the rocks. (Haraway, 2015, 233).

As another alternative, Haraway and Tsing propose *Plantationocene* as a term that speaks to the histories of colonialism that are at the root of the climate crisis. The ongoing debate around how to name our current epoch highlights the values and worldviews embedded in words and also what is at stake beyond the verbal realm. **'**This is a crisis inextricably tied to the metrics of justice: both human and non-human', writes Simpson (*Out of Time*, 18). Can poetry give us words for the ways in which humans and the rest of the living world are continuous?

The poems are collated in five thematic sections responding to the climate crisis: 'Emergency,' 'Grief,' 'Transformation,' 'Work,' and 'Rewilding.' In this framework there are echoes, whether intentional or not, of the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grief, moving from denial to acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1968). While the framework was groundbreaking at the time and has its utility, it also has major limitations for suggesting a linear journey through experiences of loss that can be chaotic, unpredictable and non-linear. Grief is a process, not a pathway or an event. Similarly, the conceptual structure of *Out of Time* is not particularly effective, the discrete themes seem contrived and many

if not all of the poems could sit within multiple categories. The reader is left wondering if the poems could have been organised in a different and more meaningful way, although the suggestion of a trajectory from apathy to activity, loss to creation, has potent resonances for climate work.

In the 'Work' section of the collection, two poems are printed in a landscape format, presumably because they are too wide for the book's pages. Seeing as poetry is also a visual art, this feels like a distracting error, a decision made to conform with the constraints of the portrait-oriented book rather than a reflection of the poems' meanings or the intentions of the authors. It's a shame, but there are other poems whose experimental forms are compelling, such as 'Cassandra: The Second End' (Sasha West, 108): 'And then I woke. Even my fear had been living / in that old human fallacy: singular redemption, self as fulcrum: Other bodies had started / the burning before me: after me other bodies would / cover the last cold ember...' The colons, like the virgules in an earlier poem in the collection ('Fuck / Humanity' by Inua Ellams, 97) are powerful instruments of pacing. Thoughts lead to more thoughts; the grammar represents a flow of interconnected ideas.

Out of Time brings to mind the work of poet, editor and human rights advocate Carolyn Forché on what she calls 'the poetry of witness' (Forché 1993), a literature that is rooted in the personal but occupies a space of political resistance and struggle. Forché explores links between poetry, the documentation of atrocities, and activism that are relevant when considering the realm of 'eco writing'. A poet can be understood as a conscientious objector in the war against life, or perhaps as a doula sitting vigil at the deathbed. It could be that the art of the poet in a time of crisis is to skilfully lead a reader into a place of discomfort prompting neither hyperarousal nor disassociation (Simpson refers to *two modes – of panic and*

complacency (19)) – but action. Reading the poem is a form of sanctuary, as is the act of writing it. As readers, we are simultaneously witnesses, memory bearers and participants in the making of the future.

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