Recycles: the Eco-Ethical Poetics of Found Text in Contemporary Poetry

Harriet Tarlo (*Sheffield Hallam University*)[1]

Abstract:

This essay proposes that the use of found text is particularly prevalent in the work of experimental British and American poets with an interest in environment and ecology. It considers whether this recycling of texts might be considered a form of ecopoetics. Drawing on and drawing together the work of British and American contemporary poets, it examines found text poetry in the light of this thesis by considering three central areas: the methodology employed by poets in their use of found text; the spirit of citation (ranging from homage to satire); and the eco-ethical significance of this practice. The range of poetry referenced illustrates the diversity of found poetry methodologies and introduces the reader to some little known texts by new writers such as Dorothy Alexander, as well as to poems by well-established writers such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis. The essay argues that, in all this work, we see writing in which an eco-ethical stance is embedded in a form that endeavours to stimulate the reader into understanding and action. Further, these found text methodologies work against the capitalist commodification of poetry within a culture that prizes originality and ownership above collaboration and globality. The essay attempts to practise what it preaches by using the poets' own words on these issues via writers' notes, interviews and e-mail conversation.

Introduction

There is a particular dynamism in poetry which incorporates found words and phrases as poets point to textual material other than their own. Energy is produced from the meeting of *their* words with *our* words or, in poems composed entirely of found text, simply in the arrangement, spatial form or structure of the work. As a poet and academic who both writes and critiques poetry generally perceived as experimental or linguistically innovative, I have always been fascinated with the use of found text within such work. It is of course a thread running through the modernist tradition in poetry, in evidence from the era of Pound, Zukofsky, Niedecker and MacDiarmid to the present day.[1] However, it seems to me, that found text is particularly prevalent in contemporary

[1] *Harriet Tarlo, Department of English, Humanities Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK S1 1WBr* h.tarlo@shu.ac.uk

experimental poetry which has a philosophical or political engagement with the environment and/or ecology.[2]

I had opportunity to put this theory to the test recently, when I edited a special feature on "Ecopoetics" for *How2*, the online journal devoted to "modernist and contemporary innovative writing practices by women."[3] Over half of the forty odd submissions I received made use of found texts ranging from Darwin to contemporary news reports. After considerable deliberations over how to present the feature, I decided to showcase found poetry within a section entitled "Recycles." To me, this was more than a whimsical or jokey title: I felt that the use of found text as a structural and linguistic technique was intimately bound up with the work's ideological and philosophical stance on environment and ecology. Here we might be able to explore a relatively concrete example of that much-debated—sometimes nebulous—new term, "ecopoetics."[4]

The most effective and, perhaps the most ecological, method of approaching this question is to work from the poetry outward, rather than to attempt to impose a theory or system from above. I begin this essay by looking at methodology, at *how* found text is used in relevant poetry texts. I then consider the spirit in which it is practised and in which it is received and, finally, how and whether we can perceive this in eco-ethical terms. I shall refer to recently published work by a number of representative contemporary British and American poets, some of whom appear in *How2*. I also draw on interviews and writers' notes. These can be useful in explicating poets' methodologies, but, more importantly, they take me, in the spirit of this essay, beyond my own preoccupations into a wider sense of what a found poetry ecopoetics might be.

Methodologies

Methodology is fundamentally a series of decisions made by a writer from a spectrum of possibilities. Firstly, use of found text always involves a degree of selection. At one extreme, this may be the deliberate choice of specific pieces of text; at the other, it can involve the more random use of cut-up or oulipo-type methods. There is, of course, a spectrum of methods in between these two, for instance, the use of restricted or random methods applied to carefully selected texts, or the use of careful selection from a broader, more random, set of cultural texts. Then there are the related questions of whether the selection is of fragments or larger pieces of text from one source or several, and whether found text is then spliced with the writer's own work or used exclusively. In the latter case, the writer's input is restricted to rearrangement or "collage" of "cut-up" text. The final decision I shall touch on is that of attribution, whether poets acknowledge sources directly, indirectly or not at all, and the significance of this.

There are several poets with an interest in environment who make work with carefully selected found text from specific sources juxtaposed with their own words, often in open form pages. These include the American poets, Cynthia Hogue and Jane Joritz-Nagawaka, and British poets, Peter Riley and Frances Presley. Over recent years, Presley's work has made increasing use of found text and has also become increasingly concerned with environmental issues. In her recent sequence, "Stone Settings," Presley approaches the "puzzle" of Exmoor's stone settings, mysterious groupings of upright stone monuments.[5] She worked on site, in itself a "finding" of text from a non-literary, material source. She also engaged in research to uncover texts that previous writers, in particular women archaeologists, had written about the setting and incorporated these directly into the resulting poems. It is interesting to perceive the extent to which she eclipses herself as a poet in an e-mail written in response to questions about this practice:

> I think at one time, in the course of the project, I believed the only "poetry" I could write was either in the landscape or these "arrangements" of found texts […] These arrangements applied to the archaeological texts I uncovered which had to do with landscape and field work. With regard to Hazel Earley-Wilmot it was a case of using her descriptions of field-work and especially the stone settings monuments to determine the visual lay-out of the page […] (Presley, e-mail)

Clearly, Presley's use of Earley-Wilmot and others is deliberate and precise, contributing both to the words used and their arrangement within the text. In part, this constitutes a "playful use of the text as landscape or monument" (Presley, e-mail). But within this playfulness, there is much more than an exploitation of texts for artistic or formalistic ends, as a recent interview confirms: "I began to reconstruct archaeological texts and extract their sub-texts" (Presley, interview n.p.). What is implied here is a deep engagement with these texts, and the resulting poetry explores and critiques a variety of different, often gendered, perspectives of "peopled landscape" (Presley, interview n.p.).

In her series of poems on the "Naked Boy," "a big quartz boulder/astride the line of parish boundaries," Presley interlaces her own speculations with those of others in a careful arrangement of found text. In "Naked boy drunk," she produces a questioning poem about local worship:

                                                                     its spine directs the eye

                                                                     south east

                                                                     marking the

                                                        head of the Tone

                                                        before the water-table dropped

        did they worship the stone *as* the stream?

                        water worship persisted

                        worried St Augustine

                                        > the stone *as* the stream >

                        (Presley, *Stone Settings* 43)

In "Naked boys beaten," she brings to life Jack Hurley's theory of the boy as a ritual victim stripped naked and beaten to mark out parish boundaries, and then critiques this from a female perspective through a brief, sardonic "her footnote": "false analogy no/local evidence supports his/fantasy" (Presley, *Stone Settings* 45). In "Naked Boy as linguistic confusion," Presley makes extensive use of Hazel Eardley Wilmot's archaeological writings to consider an entirely different reading of "Naked Boy":

Bu

or

boy

has a stately pedigree

meaning ox or bull or cow

shared by the earliest farmers

before the tribes parted

one of Homer's epithets for Hera

Queen of Heaven

was 'ox-eyed'

bo-opis

if Knackyboy meant

hill of cattle

did Saxons anglicise it as

Naked Boy?

(Presley, *Stone Settings* 47)

In her found tracings of Exmoor archaeology, legend and "peopled" landscape, Presley ultimately always comes back to place, often evoking the intimacy between place and people, now long eclipsed.[6] Although the texts she uses here are relatively recent, published in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, through them she reaches back, via Homer and Augustine, to pre-history in these speculative, suggestive poems.

The work of Scottish poet, Dorothy Alexander, engages in a more restricted and more random selection of text, once again from deliberately selected sources. Alexander used a single found text from the front page of a British newspaper in order to generate her piece entitled "Final Warning." The original article's banner headline was "Final Warning" and it posited five purported scenarios for temperature rises between +2.4°

and +6.4° by the year 2100.[7] Her writer's notes explain her word extraction and "worming" methodologies:

> […] I used a technique […] in which a word pool is formed by searching along and down through the lines of text in a kind of extreme word search (in this instance twenty eight [sic] pages of words were generated). Poems are constructed from within this word pool, and the letters of each word are then (re-)placed on the page in direct relation to the base text. (Alexander, "Working Notes," n.p.)

There is a combination of arbitrary and creative selection here, with the poet restricting herself to a particular "word pool" in order to compose. The most random element of the process is the actual placing of the words on the page. The resulting long thin strands of poems, with a letter, a word fragment or single word to a line, form what Alexander describes as "a non-linear kinetic with an increased emphasis on the materiality of the word" ("Working Notes," n.p.). If Presley's work is open form, perhaps we can describe Alexander's as *open language*.

In "Final Warning," Alexander reproduces the newspaper extract three times, followed by three poetic pieces which open with the exclamations, "ugh," "oops" and "exit." These indicate a playful, even bathetic, element to these found responses to and from the source text. Yet, as we read on, other effects emerge: "ugh," "oops" and "exit" can be read as powerful, almost visceral, responses to the climate change crisis. The first piece follows "ugh" with a satirical side reference to the opening lines of Virgil's *Aeniad*: "I sing of arms and of the man". On the one hand, this seems to be a comic juxtaposition and yet, perhaps, it is not so irrelevant after all, bringing to mind images of the human relationship with the natural world as it is so often portrayed, i.e. as a war, first to conquer and exploit natural resources, and then to solve the environmental crisis. It recalls all those headlines which see this as the greatest, latest (perhaps last) battle that needs to be fought. As the "ugh" section continues, we can piece together phrases such as "taint clinging to rain and laws" and "what tears will solder." These evoke a powerful sense of anger and mourning in these found poetic meditations on the dry newspaper text. In piecing the fragments together to "make sense," it is important to preserve the original effect of considering such fractured textual pages. Above all, they suggest the collapse—through disintegration, extinction, fragmentation—of our world through climate change, a story that cannot be fully told or understood, but which we must attempt to grasp, to piece together, to be responsible for. This collapse permeates the psyche in a different way from the news headline, and yet the poem works with it. In some respects, Alexander's text recalls Peter Reading's better known sequence of poems on global warming, *-273.15*. Reading also makes extensive use of found text, including distorted and fractured pages from science journalism, though he contains this within a more obvious apocalyptic narrative about the disappearance of species expressed through the repeated phrase "and didya read...?," "and didya read...?" (n.p.).

A very different example of the exclusive use of found text is to be encountered in American poet Janis Butler Holm's sequence, "Seminar," which is composed entirely from the writings of eminent nineteenth-century nature writers, Emerson, Thoreau and Burroughs. Whereas Alexander *selects* words from a single newspaper source for her poems, Butler Holm's poems are created by *omitting* words (specifically nouns) from her chosen passages of text. She described this process to me as "reverse collage." Here is a striking example of this technique:

From John Burroughs's "Emerson"

He is a _____ who occupies every _____ of his rightful _____; he is there in proper _____ to the farthest _____. Not every _____ is himself and his best _____ at all _____ and to his finger _____. Many great _____, perhaps the _____, have more or less neutral or waste _____. You must penetrate a _____ before you reach the real _____. Or there is a good wide _____ of the _____ which is sure to put them on good _____ with the _____ of their _____. (*How2* 3.2 (2007), np)

In Holm's act of deliberate omission, she creates a critique of the original text which could be described as gendered and eco-critical. With the nouns removed from these passages, the verbs of occupation and penetration leap out at us, revealing the not entirely attractive desire that the original writers projected onto natural objects or landscapes. Pronouns too become significant. In this case, the masculine pronoun is dominant; in other examples from the sequence, the sense of objectivity which the original texts aim to create becomes undermined by the removal of their intended objects of scrutiny. This project does not read as dissimilar to Presley's, though the techniques employed are very different.[8]

The Spirit of Citation

As we have already begun to see, found text can be cited and received in various emotional registers, and this makes part of its dynamism. Emotion is a strong word, but, reading found poetry, one grows aware of strong, often ambivalent, feelings surrounding the original texts. Sometimes, we sense that we can interpret the spirit of citation with some certainty. At other moments, poets present the found text more starkly, even in the shape of evidence or information, leaving readers to develop their own emotional responses. In including the original texts, in whatever form, it can be argued that this dynamic always involves a conversation between at least three persons, namely: the writer, the composer of the found text and the reader. I want to explore these dynamics a little further here, highlighting found text poems which seem to me to occupy spaces within an emotional spectrum ranging from homage to the writers cited (a kind of love is at play in this instance) to satirical use of found text (with a kind of hatred, often accompanied by anger, in evidence here).

There are many examples of homage within found text usage. Frances Presley acknowledges that her citations from archaeologists such as Hazel Eardley-Wilmot are partly "my tribute to the texts as such, and the quality of the writing (often by neglected women archaeologists)" (Presley, e-mail). Cynthia Hogue's poems in *How2* cite and laud the artist, Agnes Denes, and the poet, W.S. Merwin, in particular for their environmental ethos. The late British poet, Richard Caddel, made reference to a wide network of writers, from the ancient Welsh poet, Anuerin, to his own contemporaries. His found text methodologies ranged from cut-up to quotation to literal and free translation. His sequence, *Ground,* uses the repetition of a sentence from E.M. Nicholson. This acts as the "ground beat" to the poem, around which Caddel weaves a complex series of different melodies, a *passacaglia* of words:

> My *Ground* is a modified approach to the musician's understanding of
> the term; musical terms tend to acquire extra meanings in the course of
> translation to literary use. E.M. Nicholson's attempt to re-instate some of
> the older names of common birds (see, for instance, *Birds and Men*,

Collins, 1951) was lost in a sea of pesticide. No ground is pure. (Caddel, *Magpie Words* 181)

In these few carefully chosen words, Caddel reflects on the use of his musical methodology, offers a tribute to Nicholson, and references environmental pollution. The phrase, "no ground is pure," can also be read as an acknowledgment of his own mixed sources and influences. Max Nicholson was a British environmentalist, one of the founders of the World Wildlife Fund (now the Worldwide Fund for Nature) and The Nature Conservancy (now English Nature). He was also an ornithologist, who wrote one of the first books, *Birds and Men*, to reflect in detail on "the impact of civilisation on our bird life" (xiii). It is also Nicholson's care for the language that appeals to Caddel, who references Nicholson's sturdy defence of his use of the old names for birds, in particular the name "throstle" rather than the more commonly used "thrush" (Nicholson xv, 140). Caddel's description of building up *Ground* from notes "relating to loss, relating to small things being endangered" can be read in multiple ways (Caddel, Interview 98).

Ground also offers yet another model of the use of found text, Nicholson's sentence on the behaviour of throstles becoming the basis for eleven poems, disparate in form and context.[9] It is difficult to quote enough of this text to enable the reader to witness this process at work, but in this extract, we see the sentence dispersed amongst Caddel's own words, both observational and philosophical ones:

        July—and still damp after much rain,

            throstles feeding on the ground

                as though their lives depended on it.

        The garden—a painted biscuit-tin-lid, hollyhocks

            stand stiffly upright, heads cocked to one side—

            listening, as we must, to our roots—

        (Caddel, *Magpie Words* 95)

Caddel enters and extends the spirit of Nicholson's original book, provoking serious reflection on how we perceive throstles specifically, as well as on the connections between birds and people more generically. As such, he approaches a key question in the eco-critical debate, namely how far we can distinguish ourselves from non-human beings.

Found text used in homage acknowledges another and builds on what that author has produced. This might be a historical figure, a recently deceased person such as Presley's Eardley-Wilmot, or a contemporary (Nicholson was 20 years older than Caddel, but they both died in April 2003). It gestures to that other as significant, even though perhaps neglected. There is also humility in this form of citation—the poet challenges the great romantic myth of originality, of the poet as a genius. Instead the

poet is a re-user, a recycler of words—hence Caddel's chosen title for his collected poems, *Magpie Words*. In interview, Caddel explains that it was the *finding* of the Nicholson quote which enabled him to bring together his *lost* fragments in order to compose *Ground* (Caddel, Interview 98). Contrary to popular belief, the best avant-garde poetries have always reached beyond inclusive self-referentiality. This practice acknowledges an important political (and poetical) principle, i.e. that there is not enough time for each generation to discover anew what words and actions really matter. In environmental politics, this proves all the more keenly the case.

The veteran American poet, environmentalist and educator, Jack Collom, is perhaps one of the most ecological thinkers around in terms of building relevant, recycled texts from all eras into his own very contemporary, free-ranging poems. His method could be described as "naturally" chaotic and democratic—a third-grade child's poem carries the same weight as the work of a computer scientist or philosopher. The range of his spirit of citation is equally eclectic so that texts cited approvingly, satirically and ambivalently might all jostle together within the same poem. This happens, for example, in the poem, "Passage," in which Collom traces the history of the destruction of the centuries-old passenger pigeon population to the point of extinction. Over ten pages, he intersperses his own lyric, empathetic and mimetic representations of pigeon experience and sound with found text dating from 1605-1900 and demonstrating human attitudes from rapacious greed to conservation. Like Holm and Siel Ju, whose Darwin poems feature in the *How2* Ecopoetics issue, Collom is able to use found text to explore ecological and emotional responses to significant figures in America's history, be these responses admiring, critical or ambivalent ones. He does this on a large scale in his book *Arguing With Something Plato Said*. Here Collom includes a "Section of Found Objects," seven extracts from texts, including Darwin, Audubon, Columbus and the eighteenth-century explorer, William Clark. Thus he incorporates elements of the history of America's engagement with its own landscape in the words of relevant figures, words that speak to each other and radiate outwards to form relationships with his own poems which make up the collection.[10] Collom and others cited here acknowledge that language, understanding and poetry are cumulative, meditative and, above all, exist within a context rather than outside of one. The Canadian poet, a.rawlings, describes her compositional process as working with "text as an environment (as its own ecosystem, microcosm) and […] text in its environment (context)" (n.p.).

Of course, the textual world that surrounds most of us on a daily basis does not consist solely of historical and literary texts, and can often feel oppressive and overwhelming. Found poetry responds to this too often with a hostile, satirical spirit of citation, the opposite extreme to the loving homage explored at the start of this section. American poet, Harryette Mullen, and British poet, Tony Lopez, both splice together fragments of text from a dazzling diversity of non-literary sources, including advertising and news media.[11] Lopez's sources are not random, (a practice hard to conceive of, though an intriguing possibility), but he confirms that "[c]hance is certainly built into my use of what is at hand in libraries and on journeys. But mostly I go looking" (Lopez, e-mail). His slicing and splicing of text is such that, although his poems appear (in terms of page layout, that is) to be the most conventional of the texts we have so far considered, they read in fact as the most fractured and discontinuous of all.

In "Title Goes Here," a poem entirely composed of found text, we catch a glimpse of Lopez's methodology at work. Fragments of text from sources such as train announcements, company blurb, academic bureaucratic communications, teenage speech and quality media jostle together to disconcerting and amusing effect:

> In the fog of partisan rhetoric

doing a job

We try to listen to what customers want

because, unlike many companies

With a high degree of confidence

causes distress to the victim

They say he/she has a strong personality

and will be taken to pieces

Work them hard. See you later

midway through the first half

Both legs at each press conference

absolutely helpless

Before leaving the train, be aware

Yeah, Yeah, whatever (60)

It is the fractured nature of the text cited that causes insecurity in the reader: the assurances and advice directed at us are cut off mid-stream. We do not know the name of "the victim." Are we being callous in our response to him or her as we rush on to the next phrase, searching for continuities and discontinuities? Should we laugh, or not, at the "helpless legs"? Thus Lopez defamiliarises and feeds back to us the language that surrounds us. His lack of attribution reduces all the words he uses to equal, linguistic snapshots of the culture. Lopez's work insists that language is never wholly one's own in poetic practice. In common with all the poets here, he draws attention to the textual, material quality of poetry and, above all, to the fact that it exists in a sea of other textual, material language, rather than as a separate poetic discourse existing within its own rarefied tradition. Kerridge describes this refusal to occupy a "sheltered" poetic space as, in itself, a "recognition of interdependency and complicity, and by extension a sense of cultural ecology" (146). In Lopez's ruthless reflection of the contemporary world, it is perhaps inevitable that references to actual, material environmental concerns have crept into more recent work:

> […]   If you need to make a claim
>
> you write it out in longhand and blot the page.
>
> I hear that Bush has decided to rat on Kyoto
>
> and work on projects that would have otherwise
>
> been impossible. Are we not all Palestinian? (1)

In this poem, "1 Screen," and the final poem of the book, "Z Screen," Lopez, builds pictures of a threatening contemporary landscape.[12]

Kerridge finds Lopez's to be "an austerely self-denying style […] relinquishing direct utterance completely but full of indirect statement" (143). Lopez may seem to be leaving the intellectual and emotional response up to the reader. However, I see his work as profoundly satirical, carrying a weight of anger and disgust, conveyed through wit and humour. As such, I think his work does convey the spirit of citation, in other words, his own emotional response to the texts he cites. As he says in an interview with Thurston, "[f]ear, anger and stress will sharpen up anyone's wit" (n.p.). As readers, we are caught up in these feelings, in particular the fear and powerlessness of being one of the pawns trapped in his critique of the commodification of all elements of human life.[13] His use of found text, however, also confronts us with our complicity as users of the common cultural coinage of our own everyday language, since we are fully paid-up members of the culture he reflects.

Eco-Ethical Significance

A sense of anger and powerlessness often characterises how we feel about the global, particularly environmental, issues that face us now, and some readers of this essay may think that, up to now, I have done little more than demonstrate how poets articulate these feelings for us. However many contemporary poets are exercised by the question of what their work can do outside the world of poetry. For Lopez, use of found text is about "facing outwards […], making that process obvious in the work […and] making work that has an impact beyond the world of poetry" (Lopez, Interview n.p.). Hogue writes, "I find myself often asking these days: What can shift our human consciousness?" ("Working Notes" n.p.). The major American poet and critic, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, answers Hogue's question thus:

> Will anything teach us? A poem with both affect and information has as much chance as anything to give rise to understanding, via an incantation of words that turns the mind, deturns our thinking, makes us face our world, and, perhaps, even motivates us to political action. (n.p.)

DuPlessis is referring to the Situationist practice of *détournement* here, a practice of "appropriating" and "turning back" public language, which Hampson, interestingly, also applies to Lopez (102). For Raoul Vaneigem, the Belgian Situationist, *détournement* involved "acts […] against power" requiring tactics "taking into account the strength of the enemy" (Vaneigem quoted in Hampson 102). For Guy Debord, this included the "negation and subversion of 'official public language'" that "conceals and protects" the public world (Debord quoted in Hampson 102). Through their found poetry poetics,

Lopez, DuPlessis and Mullen practice this "turning back" of public language against itself. For DuPlessis, as cited above, "this must "inform" as well as satirise or emotionally affect. Perhaps she is thinking here of Debord's statement that "[i]nformation is power's poetry (the counterpoetry of the maintenance of law and order)" (Debord quoted in Hampson 102). Arguably, DuPlessis determines to recapture information for poetry. Within "the vast plethora of news that washes over us" is the news that we need to hear and digest ("Working Notes" n.p.). Our political and environmental awareness grows ever more global, making us increasingly dependent on news media. Yet, as we are bombarded by narratives of disaster and apocalypse, particularly relating to climate change, there is a danger of not just helplessness and despair, but also, most harmfully, of desensitivisation. Kerridge, via Slavoj Žižek, has noted how our response can never be adequate since we are dealing with material beyond "our most unquestionable presuppositions," such as "our everyday understanding of 'nature' as a regular, rhythmic process" (132).

In Hogue's playful "After a Hurricane There's Nowhere to Go," a poem "adapted from a 2004 issue of St. Petersburg Times" ("Working Notes" n.p.), the poet combines fragments of a local news story with her own text not only to highlight an individual's experience of flooding, but also the experience of an activist:

> "I have fought this for years and years," Cynthia Hogue said. "Don't drain the wetlands," I argued. "Birds need them. We need them. We do not need resorts. We do not need casinos."

> Elements lay strewn across her bed. Among the gold, the copper, the seaborgium, the tungsten, were notebooks from Hogue's ongoing fight with officials about coastal marshlands and hurricanes. "The storms come and no one listens to me. I feel like dancing in them," she said. "What else can I do? I've tried everything else depending on truth."

> But as she waded through her home on Ballast Point, Hogue decided not to count on truth anymore.

> ("Five Poems" n.p.)

Through its unexpectedly light-hearted tone and storytelling techniques, this piece brings home to us the wider story of disappearing coastal marshlands.

Similarly, in her "Draft 71: Headlines, with Spoils," one of a series of poems composed over twenty years, DuPlessis takes news headlines and recasts them in a "larger, darker font size [to] underline our condition" ("Working Notes" n.p.). She thus resists the "washing over" effect, producing poetry which combines "information with feeling":

Night sky, wet roads; headlines thick,

> big-font lines, the whole shtick

> > in I Ching throws.

Auto and plant emissions linked to fetal harm

> bling bling—"linked to"

> > but, as stated, "no cause for alarm."

[…]

There is a garish palette of superabundance at an undisclosed location.

Shopping binge compensates for a low industrial sector

Buy enlarge.

Freedom of Choice! ("linked to," as stated, "no cause for alarm")

And then the prototype robot-soldier

"readied, aimed and fired at a Pepsi can,

performing the basic tasks of hunting and killing."

So That:

This work will never hit

the post-production stage,

because

Tanker Sinks Off Spain, Threatening Eco-disaster

The ecology of everything holding, breaking, presenting, emerging, swarming forward into linked emergencies. What is the damage done? to whom? how long to cover over? How will the "R" (find and replace) ever recover? Watch those startling sticks of chance get cast, and yo, your name here. (91-93)

DuPlessis has the creative manipulation of print media in common with Alexander, Reading, Lopez and Hogue. There are further features in common with Lopez, in particular the sense of complicity and use of direct appeal to the reader: DuPlessis's "your name here" chimes with Lopez's "Title Goes Here." In contrast to Lopez, though, DuPlessis's "headlines" are cited informatively and, in her notes, are attributed to sources such as *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *International Herald Tribune*. Without sacrificing subtlety and context, DuPlessis makes us feel that our response is demanded and should even be translated into some kind of action.

This is perhaps the greatest, and most idealistic, ambition for poetry and indeed for ecopoetics as a new critical tool. I would like to conclude this essay, however, by maintaining, as I have implied throughout, that the practice of found text poetics can in itself be philosophically and practically eco-ethical. As I have argued above, such a poetics destabilises single perspectives in favour of multiple ones and builds on knowledge, rather than constantly re-learning it. Many of the poets I have cited recognise this. For Alexander, her found text experiment is important for the "non-

hierarchical and inclusive nature of its processes" ("Working Notes" n.p.). Mullen entitled her recent compendium of three collections, *Recyclopedia*, reflecting her use of found material and her belief that:

> If the encyclopedia contains general knowledge, the recyclopdia salvages and finds imaginative uses for knowledge. That's what poetry does when it remakes and renews words, images, and ideas, transforming surplus cultural information into something unexpected. (vii)

As this title suggests, Mullen, better known for exploring gender and race issues, also shows considerable environmental awareness, particularly in *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992), where she explores the politics of food and consumerism. Here we find poems casting Mullen's mischievous and critical eye on human dealings with animals, cleaning products and waste, all environmental issues of note. It is significant that many poets for whom contemporary, global politics has always proved important, are now showing increased awareness of environment and ecology, Lopez, Mullen and DuPlessis being just three notable examples. The fact that environmental concerns jostle together with all their other political and cultural material is a salutary strength: ecology, like poetry, cannot exist in isolation if it is to be taken seriously politically. This perhaps constitutes an extension of Kerridge's "cultural ecology."

It is notable that many poets who use found text also engage in collaborative practice. Presley's "Stone Settings" were written with the British poet, Tilla Brading. Jack Collom is a great collaborator, even setting himself up on the street to compose with anyone who will stop to work with him.[14] Perhaps the most striking example of found text and collaboration work in tandem is *Deep eco pré*, the project of American poets, Tina Darragh and Marcella Durand, using found text from Francis Ponge's *Making of the Pre* (*La fabrique du pré*, 1971) and Michael Zimmerman's *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* (1997). The poets began with "straightforward juxtapositions of texts from both authors" and went on to "overlap language and space out sounds in honor of Zimmerman's call to keep deep ecology, social ecology and ecofeminist ideas from lapsing into the logic of identity" (Darragh and Durand, "Working Notes" n.p.). The effect of this technique is to create philosophical and political texts reflecting on poetics, via Ponge, and on deep ecology, via Zimmerman. As with Caddel's *Ground*, *Deep eco pré* works incrementally, as demonstrated by the following dynamic fragment:

> active cert   already walked upon (ex-visioning)
>
>   **green** to move limited spanse the little ream
>
> an amenity (*our nature*!)   a great convex hwic
>
> surge if tribal "disclosure"   …. *where nothing* ….
>
> er enr er energ shalling
>
> identical (**truth claims**) precis this ton
>
> (Darragh and Durand, *Deep eco pré* n.p.)

Like DuPlessis, the found text techniques of Durand and Darragh are devised with environmental activism in mind. They write of constructing a procedure which "underscores the necessity for […] forms of radical ecology to continuously challenge

and complement one another *as a way to foreground social justice issues and emancipatory goals*" (n.p., my italics). This process—"the tracking of 'things' in terms of other 'things,'" and, crucially, the presence of four voices in this poetic conversation—shifts their poetics "away from the anthropocentric 'nature poem' as a representation of the poet's 'deep dark interiors'" (Darragh and Durand, "Working Notes" n.p.). The ecopoetic resistance of the lyric "I" described here differs from the previous century's obsession with "destabilising the subject," a practice which often remained focused on the internal layers and levels of the human psyche. In much of the work explored here, the inner self/outer world distinction so dear to nature poetry through the ages has become increasingly irrelevant, the incorporation of found text being a significant part of this shift.

I should like to build on these arguments about found text and collaboration by looking briefly at notions of ownership in poetry and in the wider culture. In a sense, the idea of owning words is as absurd as the idea of owning natural resources, and yet both ideas are taken as real. It would not be too much of a leap to argue that these attitudes have contributed to the environmental predicament we find ourselves in today, as well as to our inability to think globally and cooperatively to get out of it. As I write, the battle between Russia, Canada, America, Norway and Denmark for ownership of the Arctic's rich resources continues, an unseemly empire building. It requires a poetics of radical imagining to assert the absurdity of ownership. Norman Jope describes Caddel's work in the following terms:

> Such a poetry […] offers us the world beyond the in-your-face world that is thrown into our faces and rammed down our throats daily by the imperatives of Capital, to the point (and this is known well by its creators) when any alternative approach to life is seen as inadequate […]" (n.p.)

Jope (born in 1960) finds it difficult for his generation to empathise with this work "because the sense of an Outside it works on has retreated yet further into the distance" (n.p.). But perhaps the environmental situation is already turning that tide, and younger people are beginning to feel that it is "in-your-face" capitalism which should be regarded as "inadequate and old-fashioned."

At the present time, it still seems impossible to escape the dominance of consumer-capitalism, with its attendant ideas of ownership and originality—our political culture, our business culture and our academic culture are imbued with it. All employ the rhetoric of progress and entrepreneurial spirit. In debates around found text in the seminar room, students are often exercised by the related concepts of ownership and originality in poetry. Both are deeply embedded in the mythical image of the lyric poet in our society. Legalistically, they are also embedded in academic codes of conduct and copyright law. Creative Writing students are, after all, regularly required to sign declarations of academic integrity meant to attest that their work is their own. Durand, hearing that I was talking about this subject at the "Poetic Ecologies" conference in Brussels, remarked: "I'd be interested if anyone discusses how the value of proprietorship (so intensely promoted currently in copyright laws) conflicts with recycling/hommage/glorious plagiarism!" (Durand, e-mail). Good question, and we can see why this might concern her, but Durand's tone reveals her insouciant rebelliousness in the face of "proprietorship" in poetry. The battle against the commodification of poetry is also inherent in the practices of the community of experimental poets, in their small press and little magazine culture, in the poets who run presses in order to publish other poets, and in the internet culture of journals such as *How2*. The poets I have considered here are fighting a rearguard action against ownership and originality through their rejection of poetry as product in the capitalist

economy and in the spirit of their work. The freedom of citation within the poetic culture is an important part of that shift in consciousness. Whilst I am not arguing that found poetry can save the world, it *is* subversive, not just in poetic terms, but also in deeper cultural ones, and, as such, we may rightfully see it as an ecopoetic and eco-ethical practice in action.

Endnotes

1   See Jed Rasula's *This Compost. Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (2002) for a much broader and individualistic meditation on "the ecological imperative" in American poets of the Modernist and Black Mountain generations.

2   Richard Kerridge, in an insightful essay on "Climate Change and Contemporary Modernist Poetry," makes a claim that "neo-Modernist writing," in particular "the cut-up method," can approach subjects such as climate change more effectively than "the personal lyric" and the "conventionally poetic" (133).

3   This essay is an expansion of ideas first discussed in brief in my introduction to the *How2* Special Feature on Ecopoetics.

4   See my introduction to the *How2* Special Feature on Ecopoetics for a summary of some of the debates around this term. Also see the journal, *ecopoetics*, now available online for more detailed debate.

5   For readers unfamiliar with these stones, the "Everything Exmoor" website has some pictures of the stone settings at <http://www.solarxray.com/external_links/celiahaddon.htm.>

6   In this respect, she uses archeological texts quite differently from Peter Riley in his extraordinary work, *Distant Points*, which borrows from archeological documentation on prehistoric grave contents. While both poets make careful and selective use of named sources, Riley's prose poems remain focused on the human body (or its remains) within the earth.

7   Michael McCarthy, "Final Warning," *The Independent*, London, 3rd February, 2007.

8   Since I wrote this essay, Tony Lopez has published *Darwin*, a forty page prose-poem composed entirely of found text from Darwin's writings which I would like to have considered here and which should interest the readers of this article.

9   The original sentence is testimony alone to Nicholson's powers of observation and writing skills and can be found on p. 142 of his section on throstles (140-144).

10 See also Collom's recent "personal essay" for *ecopoetics* as a dynamic and funny example of his arguing through found texts ranging from Heraclitus to third grade school children via Cocteau and Gertrude Stein.

11 See Lopez's interview with Scott Thurston for a fuller sense of his extraordinary range of sources—here he breaks down some of the sources for his poem "Assembly Point D."

12 Interestingly, these poems, like some of Presley's and Hogue's, are a response to an art exhibition, in this case by Christopher Cook. For a glimpse of some of the images from this exhibition, "Changing the Need," see <http://www.cookgraphites.com/pages/archives.htm>.

13 This reading owes something to Hampson's essay, "'Replace the Mindset': Tony Lopez and the Turning of Public Language," in *Poetry and Public Language*, ed. Tony Lopez and Anthony Caleshu (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), 95-106. See especially p. 98.

14 Perhaps most notable of Collom's collaborations is the recent book-length text co-written with Lyn Hejinian, *Situations, Sings* (2008).

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