

Margaret Ronda

## Anthropogenic Poetics

*It is the anthropos stunned by the offerings made  
by his own hands who is made to draw back in  
surprise in the face of what is morphing him.*

—Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*

The title of this essay may strike the reader as obvious, even tautological. For does not all poetry “have its origin in the activities of man”?<sup>1</sup> Does not the word *poetics* itself capture this sense of human making, the artifact as bearing forth what Susan Stewart (2011, 11) calls “the interiorization of skill and thought” captured in its composition? And does it not suggest, as well, the sense of a poem as directed *toward* the human, toward the “activities” of the reader who receives and interprets? As Stewart writes in *The Poet’s Freedom*, “[Artworks] are a record of all the choices made as they came to be, yet they become the repository of all the possible meanings with which they can be invested. They exist as a force in the long history of our efforts to represent the world to ourselves and, in the process, to humanize ourselves” (198). Yet it is the very redundancy of the term *anthropogenic*, its routing back to human causation along uncanny (or, as Bruno Latour [2013, 246] puts it, “surprising”) lines, that I am interested in pursuing in this essay. What I want to suggest is that this redundancy, this repetitive insistence on the human, gestures toward a new chapter in this “long history” that Stewart describes—a chapter illustrative of the emergent senses of human causation that accompany the Anthropocene.

The term *anthropogenic* reflects this historical present, in which the *anthropos* has become a determining force in novel ways—indeed, a collective maker, an inscriber of planetary history at the level of stratigraphic signals (see Szersynski 2012). What the Anthropocene as a new geologic era connotes, above all, is that “humankind, our own species, has become so large and active that it now rivals some of the great forces of nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system. . . . Humankind has become a global geological force in its own right” (Steffen et al. 2011, 843). As a figure for species-level human causality, *anthropogenic* illuminates what exceeds the individual but is nonetheless attributable to processes of production, consumption, and waste that “have their origin in the activities of man.”

This signaling of a heretofore unknown degree of species-wide agency, capable of altering the Earth's systems of organization, in turn unsettles definitions of the human and the humanist discourses and the aims that accompany them. For what does it mean if an entire geologic epoch "bears the face of a human," as the etymology of *anthropos* suggests? Does this not describe an unfathomable extension and redirection of the "human"—and also a new, equally confounding, sense of its limits?<sup>2</sup>

We might see *anthropos* and its related term *anthropogenic*, then, as words that speak to the nonidentity and internal estrangement that accompany this species-wide agency. If, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the Anthropocene necessitates a new "figure of the universal" that "arises from a shared sense of catastrophe" (2009, 221), such a universal exceeds our experience and eludes our capacity to understand. The anthropogenic agency characteristic of the Anthropocene "morphs" (in Latour's term) the human race into a nonhuman geophysical force—a force with which we can never fully associate ourselves. In this sense, *anthropogenic* illuminates the ways in which humans participate in this geologic agency without identifying with it. As Chakrabarty puts it, "We cannot ever experience ourselves as a geophysical force—though we now *know* that this is one of the modes of our collective existence" (2012, 12). Thus the term registers the strange forms of cognitive dissonance that arise from an awareness of a mode of existence that remains not fully susceptible to experience and from the uncanny and estranged relation to self-identity that this recognition provokes. Latour's description of the *anthropos* "made to draw back in surprise in the face of what is morphing him" (2013, 246) might be seen as a master description for this startling awareness of an anthropogenic presence perceptible in the nonhuman surroundings and for an accompanying sense that this recognition reshapes ("morphs") the human perceiver in unforeseen ways.

Perhaps most evocative in Latour's portrayal of this dynamic encounter is how his vocabulary stresses the face-to-face, underscoring its "anthropomorphic, or, better, anthropogenic" qualities (246). Latour's insistence on the "anthropogenic" extends the human outward via the literary trope of prosopopoeia, what Paul de Man calls "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (1979, 926). And indeed, Latour is speaking specifically of the artwork and its process of subjectification, the way an artwork "gains the form of a human in a rebound effect" (2013,

246)—a process that teaches the perceiver how to imagine or figure himself or herself in new and surprising ways. This essay, too, is concerned with the redescription of the human via the circuit of *poiesis*, focusing on the ways in which this process takes on newly anthropogenic contours in the Anthropocene era. How might the uncannily humanizing process that both Stewart and Latour describe as central to the operations of the artwork be redefined in light of the intensified senses of the anthropogenic outlined above? We might regard the forms of estranged recognition that emerge as a kind of defacement or disfiguration, after de Man’s description of prosopopoeia as concerned with “the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration” (926).

Apostrophe and prosopopoeia are, of course, the essential poetic tropes for examining the problems and possibilities of speaking for, to, with, and in the absence of others. Barbara Johnson, writing of de Man’s work on these rhetorical figures, points out that they can extend who or what “counts as a person,” ascribing significance and relationality to the nonhuman world: “Apostrophe enables the poet to transform an ‘I-it’ relationship into an ‘I-thou’ relationship, thus making a relation between persons out of what was in fact a relation between a person and non-persons” (2010, 6, 9). These figurations of intimacy at the same time denote distance, unreachability. The speaker calls across an unbridgeable chasm, attempting to fulfill what Jonathan Culler calls an “impossible imperative”—to bring the other into full, flesh-and-blood presence, to allow the other to speak back (1981, 146). This desire to “face” the other involves various forms of reckoning, including a confrontation with absence itself: “‘To face’ means not only to turn one’s countenance toward but also to confront, acknowledge, internalize without dodging” (182). These are the tropes that name and draw forth, measuring dependencies, mutual obligations, imbalance, inadequacy, unnatural loss, and deprivation. And they redound upon the speaker, vivifying his or her life *after* life, illuminating the uncanny absences he or she inhabits.

Johnson’s work on apostrophe emphasizes the centrality of such figures to political rhetoric, arguing that understanding how rhetorical figure works is essential for grasping larger “questions of life and death, of who will wield and who will receive violence in a given human society” (1986, 29). Johnson focuses on political discourse surrounding the boundaries of personhood (such as arguments on abortion) as bearing out, on another scene, the questions of identification and dependency in tropes discovered chiefly in lyric

poetry. In this sense, Johnson makes an argument for literature—and poetry in particular—as a privileged terrain in which essential dynamics of relationality that extend to the political sphere are staged and worked through. Extending Johnson's claims to the ecological relations of the Anthropocene era in turn underscores the way in which current poetic works might offer distinctive means for conceptualizing the new subjectifications of the human in a time of generalized planetary crisis.

To examine one contemporary literary province populated with these rhetorical figures, I turn now to ecopoetics, a poetic field whose emergence, at least in North America, can be traced to the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Skinner, editor of the seminal journal *ecopoetics*, situates its appearance within a particular moment of “historical urgency”: “*ecopoetics* . . . takes on the ‘eco’ frame, in recognition that human impact on the earth and other species, is without a doubt the historical watershed of our generation, a generation born in the second half of the twentieth century” (2001, 7). Skinner differentiates ecopoetics from earlier forms of nature writing, suggesting that the omnipresence of anthropogenic environmental crisis necessarily transforms older epistemological and literary frameworks. Ecopoetics might be seen as a nascent poetry of the Anthropocene, interested in the ways in which human obligations to the natural world must be reimaged in the present. Drawing attention to the complex dependencies of planetary life at various scales, these works highlight the claims held on us by the nonhuman world. After “the end of nature,” how can a poem speak for, to, with ecological phenomena? How can a poem give matter and creaturely life a “voice,” a “face”? How can a poem make ecological absence and extinction visible? How does it register the new, disturbing presences (toxic sludge, oil spills, dead zones) of the Anthropocene? Ecopoetics texts often dramatize the attempt to recognize, to draw into relation, and such texts consider the incommensurabilities and violent estrangements of that effort. The tropes of apostrophe and prosopopoeia appear, in ecopoetics texts, as urgent questions or problems rather than assurances: “You still there?” one of Brenda Hillman’s poems asks (2009, 70). These tropes also occur as extravagant or ironized forms of address, admissions of guilt and shame, or refusals or inability to address another. What emerges from these encounters is often a disconcerting recognition of a newly “invented” human. As Lisa Robertson writes in *The Weather*, “We come upon our thought. . . . The sky is packed; it is ours. The sky is thickening; we have been invented” (2001, 38).

Yet to discuss eco-poetics in terms of these long-standing tropes of anthropomorphism—to define it as an anthropogenic poetics, as I propose here—is certainly to define this poetic field against the grain of its own dominant politics of representation. Poets affiliated with eco-poetics tend to define their work as strongly committed to the attempt to abandon models of literary authority that would amalgamate anthropogenic power rather than disperse it. Indeed, a foundational assumption animating eco-poetics is a suspicion of what Skinner calls, in the inaugural introduction to *ecopoetics*, “transparent narratives of self-discovery, or solipsistic, self-expressive displays,” which are, he argues, “ill-suited to the current crisis” (2001, 6). Skinner calls for a move away from a certain first-person lyricism—a familiar target for avant-garde poetics—in favor of poetry “alive to the differentiating nature of its own materials.” Such refusal involves a scaling down of the human as simply another organism coexisting within an ecosystem. As Evelyn Reilly, author of a well-known eco-poetics text, *Styrofoam*, claims elsewhere, “Ecopoetics reflects yet another in a series of human decenterings, as from an ecological perspective, the self dissolves into the gene pool and the species into the ecosystem. In fact, eco-poetics requires the abandonment of the idea of center for a position in an infinitely extensive net of relations” (2010, 257). Such descriptions frame eco-poetics as what Peter Larkin calls a “vigilant counter-anthropomorphism”—displaying a resistance to the human’s speaking “for” the natural world and to the pathetic fallacy (2004–5, 114). In these accounts—which echo new materialist and object-oriented ontology approaches, with their insistence on flat or horizontalized ontologies—the eco-poetics text becomes instead a living enactment of these dehierarchized, coexisting beings and processes.

There is, clearly, an ethical motivation behind these self-portrayals. They reflect a posthumanist desire to break down dualisms, to promote species-humility and move toward a biocentric perspective, and to portray a pre- (or post)linguistic, bodily (or prosthetic) interspecies enmeshment. These investments, however, might be considered symptomatically rather than straightforwardly, as signals of palpably felt pressures and powerful desires—the desire, above all, *not* to be an anthropogenic subject. For what many of these texts reveal—perhaps despite themselves—is in fact the intensified problem of anthropocentrism, pointing, via the mediating work of poetic language, to the ways in which this anthropogenic agency extends into and reshapes nonhuman forms. For example, in Reilly’s own *Styro-*

*foam*, the strange “immortality of plastic” that Styrofoam represents as it lives on in its nonbiodegraded state, taking on new and unintended shapes (such as “ankle bracelets of the birds”), becomes a figure for the extended time frame of ecological debt incurred by anthropogenic activity and a “deathless” sign of human culpability (2009, 20, 9). Substituting “we” for the Ancient Mariner’s “I,” Reilly writes,

(*for all averred, we had killed the bird* [enter albatross  
stand-in of choice

hence this mood of moods  
this fucked.flux.lux.cruX  
(11)

Styrofoam, our albatross, remakes us all as Ancient Mariners, wracked by guilt both real and mysterious, plagued by a “mood of moods” (for the Mariner, “agony,” and for Reilly, “this fucked.flux.lux.cruX”), and compelled to repeat a dreadful tale—a tale almost too transcendental and monstrous to be believed. “[G]oodnight styrene,” Reilly’s speaker sings to the ever-wakeful materials,

this particular frozen pool  
a kind of narcissism  
that reflects a white.cellular.polycarbonate.glow  
(21–22)

And indeed, many of the speaking subjects of ecopoetics texts seem Mariner-like in their haunted desire to address and confess. These speakers attempt to adjudicate their responsibility for ecological destruction, confessing to their patterns of consumption, wasteful habits, or detachment from their surroundings and attempting to tally their impossible debt. Here is Hillman again, from *Practical Water*, her 2009 meditation on water as vital, sacred, polluted, privatized, and “wrecked”:

my love & I so busily drove to a poetry reading past  
fuzzy artichokes near Gilroy Prophet thistles w/streams  
that drop near Santa Cruz  
How shall we live  
& they indicated as if John Muir replied *so low a human  
voice cannot bear*

you want your tomatoes don't you You want Almond  
 Delite & golf  
 You want to drink Sprite w/runnels of gravy at  
 Denny's\faces in  
 laminated menus windsurfing widows This is the price the  
 stream went  
 refugees in aqueducts like  
 water from a book  
 (90–91)

The idealist question posed by the speaker—“How shall we live”—is answered by a materialist gesture to the “price” of banal consumer desire, measured in the most preliminary way by the stream’s diverted, “refugee” status. “Prophet thistles” are granted a voice here to admonish the speaker, reminding her that her daily “living”—her seemingly benign everyday choices—add up to a yet uncountable cost for the nonhuman world. Michael Leong’s poem on fracking, titled “the transmission of (other subsurface agents may be considered necessary for underground control,” similarly employs prosopopoeia to interrogate and warn. In the poem, a “mouth from the open-air moratorium is now speaking”: “It says the volatile now must be accessed via the unfiltered future. / It says fire is spreading through the infrastructure of water” (2011, 309). The spectral, evanescent voices that speak back in these poems deface their human speaker rather than absolving his or her guilt or motivating any transformative action. “How shall we live”—the humanism of the question becomes monstrously realized in the more-than-human surroundings that reply. As Leong puts it, “a newly constructed awareness is now imagining us” (311).

These poems are profoundly motivated by the apostrophic impulse, “troping,” as Culler claims, “not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself” (1981, 135). In Juliana Spahr’s “Unnamed Dragonfly Species,” the desire to call into presence emerges via the mediated address of incessant Googling. The plural speaker attempts to understand their relationship to melting glaciers around the world, whose slow decline “happened far away from them,” by obsessively watching videos of glaciers breaking off and falling into the sea (2011, 76). And indeed, the distance between the “they” and the glaciers seems to be shrinking: their sublime otherness and “zombie”-like unknowability is diminishing as they are unmade by anthropogenic activity (90). The glaciers’ gradual transformation—streaming online—draws them ever closer into anthropogenic prox-

imity, and it is this indirect yet determining causality that the speaker attempts to comprehend:

The systems of relation between living things of all sorts seemed to have become in recent centuries so hierarchically human that things not human were dying at an unprecedented rate. . . . **Whip-poor-will** They knew this but didn't know what else to do. **Wood Turtle** And so they just went on living while talking loudly. **Worm Snake** Living and watching on a screen things far away from them melting. **Yellow-Breasted Chat** (93)

If the speaker “faces” the melting glacier only through screens, the poem invokes nearer presences that are also disappearing: each line is punctuated by a bolded name of an endangered species in New York State. Called forth in their endangerment, these names acknowledge nearer losses and more immediate culpability. The interruptive invocation of these names evokes a sense of ongoing obligation to these nearby inhabitants without otherwise integrating them into the poem. The names remain, unrescued, with no alleviating response. To go on, the poem's final lines indicate, in the face of such ecological destruction—local and distant—is both unthinkable and unavoidable. Thus the poem's anthropogenic subject “went on living while talking loudly,” defaced by dread, shame, and disavowal.

For Stewart, part of the “freedom” that constitutes aesthetic making is its “reversibility,” as she describes by way of a parable of a boy on a beach creating and then destroying a sand castle. “Without the freedom of reversibility enacted in unmaking, or at least always present as the potential for unmaking,” she argues, “we cannot give value to our making” (2011, 1–2). The boy's destruction of the sand castle exemplifies this potential: “Unwilling or unable to be the curator of his creation, the boy swiftly returned it to its elements” (2). What is distinctive, perhaps, about the planetary anthropogenic *poiesis* of the Anthropocene is both its irreversibility and its seemingly endless capacity to unmake. The anthropogenic poetics that this essay has surveyed are profoundly attentive to this climate of irreversible ecological destruction, and yet they also evoke the disavowing desire that Stewart's boy, “unwilling or unable to be the curator of his creation,” enacts. This sense of an unbearable responsibility that somehow must be borne is central to the psychic operations of these poems, to their forms of defacement, and to the destructive potential they evoke. Indeed, the speakers of these poems are “invented” by this unintentional yet



inescapable agency, made to carry its impossible weight. Yet these works also lay claim to the field of language as what, finally, lives on, even after definitions of the human have been so radically altered. Such poems (to borrow Sara Guyer's formulation) "acknowledge[] an infinite capacity for destruction, witnessing this destruction without overcoming it" (2007, 140). The poet's "freedom," then, is replaced by poetry's obligation, turning back with new vigilance to the long-standing figures, the "old words," to speak of, in Hillman's phrase, "a silence you can't understand" (2013, 13, 19).

## Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "anthropogenic," accessed July 5, 2014, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

2. As Will Steffen et al. argue, "The ultimate drivers of the Anthropocene . . . , if they continue unabated through this century, may well threaten the viability of contemporary civilization and perhaps even the future existence of *Homo sapiens*" (2011, 862).

3. A key point of origin for the field of eco-poetics was the publication of the experimental journal *ecopoetics*, edited by Jonathan Skinner, beginning in 2001. This journal has helped to define the field by arguing for new models of ecological engagement in poetry, particularly in terms of what Skinner calls an "investigative" and "impure poetics" (2001, 7).

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