

Offprinted from  
MODERN LANGUAGE REVIEW

VOLUME 114, PART 2

APRIL 2019

*Recomposing Eco-poetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene.*  
By LYNN KELLER. (Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism)  
Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. 2018. xv+284 pp. £49 (pbk £22).  
ISBN 978-0-813-94061-8 (pbk 978-0-813-94062-5).

In the Introduction to her study of North American eco-poetry appearing in the last fifteen years, Lynn Keller defines the self-conscious Anthropocene as ‘a powerful cultural phenomenon tied to reflexive, critical, and often anxious awareness of the scale and severity of human effects on the planet’ (p. 2). This concept signifies a ‘period of *changed recognition*’ (emphasis original) marked by intense awareness of the human capacity to transform the biosphere (p. 2). As scientists continue to debate the value of formalizing the epoch as a geotemporal unit, Keller reminds us, poets at the same time have been responding to the scale and severity of ecological crises. The impact of Anthropocene immediacies on the theory and practice of poetry, nonetheless, has been curiously underappreciated in environmental criticism.

*Recomposing Eco-poetics* offers an intervention. This boundary-pushing text brings to the fore dynamic eco-poetic work reconstituting the lyric–nature–wilderness assemblage that has dominated the study of North American eco-poetry. As such, the monograph makes a distinct contribution to eco-poetics through its thoroughgoing exploration of experimental, radical, urban, less accessible, and non-lyric modes, including the ‘fractured or partially syntactic’ (p. 11). As Keller points out, these modes have been largely sidelined in the canonization of North American environmental poetry. For example, Knickerbocker’s *Eco-poetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012) focuses on Stevens, Bishop, Wilbur, and Plath, whereas Bryson’s *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Eco-poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005) includes chapters on Berry, Harjo, Oliver, and Merwin. The experimental is conspicuously absent from these seminal texts.

Keller’s lucid analysis is organized around six themes prevailing in the environmental humanities: scalar thinking, plastic waste, apocalyptic rhetoric, interspecies communication, translocal place, and ecosocial justice. Eco-poetry’s contribution to each of these is delineated through theoretically deft readings of poets such as Ed Roberson and Evelyn Reilly, who reinterpret green and pastoral modes in terms of biopolitical urgencies. The book also calls upon the eco-poetics of Forrest Gander, Jonathan Skinner, Adam Dickinson, and others whose work, up to now, has not commanded the critical attention it deserves. In making a case for experimental strategies, Keller enlarges the scope of North American eco-poetic scholarship beyond the ‘so-called “mainstream” expressive lyric’ (p. 11).

With a posthumanist bent, *Recomposing Eco-poetics* opens up new directions for eco-poetic analysis of urban environments, industrial landscapes, manufactured objects, digital artefacts, and uncharismatic beings (the Coleopteran subjects of Jody Gladding’s *Translations from Bark Beetle* (2014) feature heavily in Chapter 4). Rather than rejecting nature poetry as incapable of rising to the occasion of the

Anthropocene, however, the monograph explicates the processes by which experimental poets disrupt—but also intersect with and extend—this tradition. Keller, accordingly, devises a lexicon apposite to articulating how ecopoetry intervenes in Anthropocene debates. A critical vocabulary of fracture and discontinuity allows her to argue, as a case in point, that meaning in Reilly's *Styrofoam* (2009) emerges from 'proliferating links generated through parataxis' and 'digitally inflected punctuation' (p. 23).

This leveraging throughout of a critical lexicon paired to the analysis of experimental ecopoetics is evident in Chapter 4, 'Understanding Nonhumans'. Exploring ecopoetry's mediation of interspecies communication, the discussion remains vigilant to the long-standing problem of literary anthropomorphism yet unhindered in suggesting the collaborative translation of non-human polysemy into human language. Biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer's generative idea of the 'grammar of animacy' supplies a cornerstone for understanding animal agency in the ecopoetics of Gladding, Skinner, and Angela Rawlings. What is more, Chapter 6, on environmental justice, invokes the postcolonial ecocriticism of Rob Nixon to analyse the relationship between social stratification and ecological disruption in the poetry of Roberson, Mark Nowak, and Myung Mi Kim. Although the book at times feels exasperatingly US-centric in purview—neglecting to link American developments to, for instance, the radical landscape poetics of contemporary British experimentalism and other movements—*Recomposing Ecopoetics*, nevertheless, is an eminently valuable addition to anglophone ecopoetic criticism.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND, AUSTRALIA

JOHN CHARLES RYAN

*Montmartre: A Cultural History*. By NICHOLAS HEWITT. (Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures, 45) Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2017. xii+319 pp. £85. ISBN 978-1-78694-023-0.

For readers interested in an intellectual tour of Montmartre, Nicholas Hewitt's new guide to its cultural history and kaleidoscopic self-presentation comes warmly recommended. Attractively illustrated and engagingly written, this exploration of Montmartre as both cultural landmark and curious partnership of quirky creativity and cynical consumerism traces its evolving claims to literary and artistic pre-eminence while at the same time exposing its reliance on fantasy and illusion.

In nine chronologically arranged chapters—and an Epilogue on Montmartre in film—Hewitt outlines Montmartre's importance as a place of permeable cultural frontiers and symbolic investment. Beginning with the construction of the Mur des Fermiers Généraux in 1784, which led to the proliferation of *lieux de plaisir* around the wall's circumference and at its crossing points, he underscores Montmartre's centrality to the development of artistic cabarets, music hall, avant-garde theatre, jazz, and the visual arts, alongside its association with crime and prostitution and its evocation in works of fiction, through the nineteenth century until the German Occupation of 1940–44. Richly descriptive, the first six chapters draw mainly on