Ecopoetics, Intermediality, and the Language of Caroline Bergvall

By Martin Schauss

It's fair to say that ecocriticism as a literary hermeneutic has moved on from what Greg Garrard called “the poetics of authenticity” (chief proponent Bill McKibben), where “it is the unmediated encounter with the real world that rescues the subject from the corrupt modern world of representation and simulation” (189). English romanticism, American transcendentalism, and pastoral traditions (Williams 1973; Bate 1991, 2000; Buell 1995, 2001;
Coupe 2000) while still important are less dominant in ecocriticism than before, and the scientism of early approaches has been exposed to strong critiques, regarding its hegemonic, universalist, and largely white settler frameworks as well as its inadequate and belated accounts of anthropogenic climate change. Recent studies on “climate fiction” (Trexler 2015; Ghosh 2016; Johns-Putra 2019) and “ecopoetics” (Schuster 2015; Keller 2017; Hume and Osborne 2018; Farrier 2019) are at least partially a response to the narrow scope of late twentieth-century and early 2000s ecocriticism.

In addition to the wide-ranging influence of postcolonial ecocriticism and eco-materialist world-literature approaches in the Environmental Humanities (Mukherjee 2010; Huggan & Tiffin 2010; Nixon 2013; DeLoughrey, Didur & Carrigan 2015; Wenzel 2019; Niblett 2020), the reframing of ecocriticism in the twenty-first century has benefited from the conception of “ecopoetics” less as a generic category than a mode of reading, or as Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne put it, “an expanded critical practice” (2). Jonathan Skinner, in the inaugural issue of ecopoetics (2001), called for an end to ecocriticism’s externalised thinking and Anglo-American exclusivity, suggesting we instead embrace “an impure poetics” (7) (implying interspecies communication but also the crossing of generic, formal, and medial boundaries). As critical practice, ecopoetics opens up the possibility of an ecological unconscious, tying poetic and formal languages to all kinds of issues from fossil capital, nuclear pollution, to neo-colonial extractivism, hydropolitics, global extinction, and climate change. It also, as Skinner and Joan Retallack among others have noted, helps to avoid pigeonholing and depoliticising indigenous knowledges and cultural forms.

For my understanding of ecopoetics, it is important that it need not rely on “green” or environmental content to register its ecological unconscious. Ecopoetics instead registers careful adjustments and attunements between ecological actors and the cultural modes of expression that shape and are shaped by those actors. Joshua Schuster’s The Ecology of Modernism is a great example of this broader operative understanding, with Schuster’s treatment of the intersection of “modernism” and ecology leading him not only to the fables of
Marianne Moore or the “ambient poetics” of Gertrude Stein (xi), but also the early recordings of Mississippi Delta blues and the silent noise environs of John Cage.

Through a reading of Caroline Bergvall’s intersectional feminist poetics in this article, I aim to show how intermedial, cross-platform literatures are particularly open to ecopoetic approaches, not least because such works are often keenly engaged in a renewing of literary and artistic energies and activating of diverse cultural forms, while also anxiously grappling with the idea that cultural production is central to the workings of the capitalist world-system. In this understanding, literary production becomes an “ecological force” (Niblett 3), a world-making (or eco-poiesis), resourceful, energetic, and involved in capitalism’s ecological regimes. The article will discuss the ecological worlding in and of Bergvall’s “texts,” concentrating on her integration of reportage and documentation, the diffusion of the work through different media and performance spaces, as well as the transhistorical emphasis on the materiality of language.

Bergvall, a French-Norwegian poet born in Germany and holding British citizenship, writes exophonically in contemporary English mixed through with Middle English, Old English, Old Norse, French and Norwegian. Of her recently completed “trilogy,” Meddle English (2011) and Alisoun Sings (2019) are partly modern reworkings of Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, while Drift (2014) draws on the 2011 refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and the anonymous Old English poem “The Seafarer.” Bergvall – who says she’s no medieval language expert herself – doesn’t require the reader to know these languages or pick up specific references; mostly we can make out the meaning as modern English is visualised or sounded into its older forms. Other parts of her books consist of concrete poems and visual art, whereas some outwardly impenetrable or mixed-language sections indicate the performative origins of the text, what Bergvall has previously called “Performance Writing” (“Keynote” 86).

The poet performs her work as part of collaborative audio-visual installations using video, live music, performance, and noise, and as ecopoetic interactions with her indoor, outdoor, and virtual environments (from the outdoor sunrise performance “Ragadawn” on the Isle of Skye to the online collaborative writing event “Night & Refuge”). It’s worth noting that the books
always follow the performance, with sometimes years between live work and written publication. Bergvall provides an overview of her process in Drift, “[t]he plan is to write a text for live voice, percussion and electronic text. To explore the archaic, tribal traffic between voice and drum, between text and beat, between air and skin, voice and breathing.” She further describes an “explicit turn towards the skaldic, shout-out traditions of poetic delivery” (128). Like her use of language, performance and sound engage a transhistorical voice that is at once collective, multiple, and splintered. Bergvall’s integration of her own process into her poetic field is notable in itself. While not unusual for poetic texts to include commentaries, the extensive and embedded nature of Bergvall’s reflections serves an important function, articulating process, yes, but also expressing the simultaneously transitional and belated quality of the text. Bergvall destabilises the distinctions between the poetic object, the performance without the object, and the politics of research which she conspicuously enters. It’s clear that the creation of a collective affective environment is among Bergvall’s key concerns, and that she sees her work as interacting within a wider cultural ecology.

The central part of Drift repeats a shortened version of a 2012 report by Forensic Oceanography (FO) on what’s become known as the “Left-To-Die Boat.” The designation refers to a small rubber boat carrying 72 migrants fleeing Tripoli towards the Italian island of Lampedusa during the early weeks of the Libyan conflict in 2011. As FO put it in their follow-up video Liquid Traces: “For fourteen days, the passengers had slowly drifted in the most surveyed waters on earth. Despite repeated contacts, 63 passengers were killed by the reluctance of all actors to rescue them” (Heller and Pezzani) (emphasis added). In total, more than 1500 migrants drowned in 2011 attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea for Europe, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), making it a record year at the time, though the number pales in comparison with later years. The “Left-To-Die Boat” report contributed to an investigation by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and to legal cases filed against the French Army for non-assistance to people in distress at sea. Bergvall’s Drift summarises the report, the gathering of survivor testimony, the precise mapping of the boat’s itinerary, its distress calls to Italian and Maltese rescue services, its multiple direct contacts
with nearby vessels and aircrafts, and the heavy maritime presence of NATO in the area, including the French and British military.

The forensic aesthetics tied to the report’s international afterlife as art installation – and other poetic reworkings like Asiya Wadud’s *Syncope* (2019) – deserves a separate article.[i] But they keep contributing to the agitated circulation of Bergvall’s *Drift*, which as live performance and sound work, and only later as book and art installation, enters the world differently than other, more static forms like the novel, less punctuated by a distinct mode of consumption, and less tied to the textual object that bestows onto the work a more ambiguous temporality. As FO’s curated evidence enters the museum space, *Drift* engages in an argument with itself about the relations between ethics and aesthetics, between ecology and text: what kind of generic, medial, narrative, and aesthetic forms can ethically relay the content of the murderous, conspiratorial atrocity?

*Drift* is explicit (even anxious) about its ethical and political responsibilities: “My role will be to shorten the narrative and relay the report’s complex piece of memorialisation, interpretation and investigation through live recitation. To register the event by recitation. Letting the recitation become a resonating chamber, a ripple effect” (134). Bergvall performs her polylingual and polyvocal language through spoken word, chant, and music (performed live, *Drift* includes percussion and noise by Ingar Zach) with influences ranging from medieval, skaldic, folk, to pop and environmental noise. An obvious point of comparison is M. NourbeSe Philip’s performance of her tidal poem *Zong!* (2008), which reworks the legal text from the Zong court case concerning the massacre of 130 enslaved Africans on the eponymous British slaver in 1781 (for a comparative reading, see Morris 2017).

Visually, the printed version of *Drift* echoes the forensic report’s satellite images by including black maps with white dots (designed by Pablo Lavalley): visual representations of bodies in the sea merge with stylized zodiac constellations. The most abstract, ambient images included are macro-treatments from an aircraft image of the “Left-To-Die Boat” (by Tom Martin). Such stacked perspectives register the de-legitimising and de-humanising abstractions of the world-
system and its internal borders. Bergvall doubles down on the falsification of perspective as the quality at once of the material-technological index and the wave movement of world-ecological pressures. This latter movement finds its more affective expression in Bergvall's original live performance as the electronic text projection (by Thomas Köppel) covers the black background with drifting white script.

Through its medial interplay, Bergvall's "text" attempts to engage self-consciously with the unevenness of cultural production and social relations that underlies it, and to push back against the depoliticising tendencies of a conceptualism based chiefly on method. In an interview from 2008-2009, Bergvall makes the point: “Collage found its last political manifestation with the Situationists but since then, and in the cut-and-paste world we live in, does it really have a political frame beyond the self-replication of consumerism? This is exactly why the whole notion of conceptual writing runs the risk of being already outmoded, unless it can become a question to do with engagement, not methodology.” (qtd. in Thurston 80-81). The ethical question of Bergvall’s work becomes less about form than about the world-making of the poetic text. Commenting on Drift, Bergvall argues that a "transhistoric practice provides its own form of contemporary engagement. It generates an actual friction between historic investigation and contemporary witnessing" (“Infra-materiality” 69). What distinguishes Bergvall’s eco-political idea of recitation from conceptual self-replication, what keeps it from becoming stale, is this transhistoric practice: the contemporary event is at once abstracted and mediated through travelling languages. The poetic event becomes a spatial mapping of combined unevenness: the militarised surveillance that organises the naval map, viewed from "the North," which produces and then expels thousands and thousands of "wasted lives," to use Zygmunt Bauman’s term. Within the transhistorical and translingual field of signification, the documented event is that which indexes the non-contemporaneity of a present distributed unequally across internal and external borders.

Bergvall conceives of this transhistorical dimension as an ecological system that both assimilates and expels poetic transactions. Here she relies on two interrelated material figurations to describe how language and its spectral historicity function as resource: that is to
say, the materiality of waste, detritus, compost, which requires archaeological work, mining, digging, etc. And water and sea imagery, which in a literary sense might speak of loss, vastness, and exile but here requires navigation and rescue, and engages an anti-colonial tradition of cross-Atlantic tidal poetics.

In one sense, *Drift* picks up the reading and writing of materiality as ecopoetic method, whereas for Forensic Architecture this process provided the legal methodology. To quote Eyal Weizman, who leads the research collective, the legal emphasis shifts “from human testimony towards objects of material evidence and forensics” including satellite data, sea currents, wreckages, ballistics, the ruined sites of blast impacts, flumes of smoke, distressed vegetation, traces of oil spillages (103). In the “Left-To-Die Boat” case, the question becomes: “How to reconstruct violations when the murder weapon is the water itself?” (Heller and Pezzani). Environments, as well as specific military and corporate actors, co-produce specific material “signatures,” particular to different executions of violence and destruction and demanding to be read.

With her “trilogy,” Bergvall enters a long history of poetic experimentation concerned with the material density of language, from Stéphane Mallarmé to Gertude Stein, to Robert Smithson, Édouard Glissant, Kamau Brathwaite, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha to NourbeSe Philip (among others). Ecopoetics allows for a robust reading of material conceptions of language as a radical engagement with world-ecological grammars. Arguably, while eco-materialists have been paying ever closer attention to extraction, resources, waste, water, and oil, to plant life and nonhuman animals, the material properties of language, and of how a work’s medial registers translate the representation of things, have often been treated as transparent when they aren’t.

Bergvall’s work is instructive here, with frequent references for instance to Caribbean poets Glissant (the sedimentation of the imposed language; the “opacity produced in words” [115]) and Brathwaite (the mudflood-temporality of his tidal poetics), as the text establishes a colonial connection between the Middle Passage and “Fortress Europe” (*Drift* 161). Bergvall describes her transhistoric, transnational mining of the muck heap that is the English language: “Let’s
imagine the midden of language. [...] Let us cut a cross-section into building-stacks of language. What gets revealed is history and ground. Or rather, ground history, compost, history as compost. Temporariness and excavation. Volatility, weathering and renewal” (*Meddle* 6). We may conceive of the resistance of the nonhuman, its relational power to rearrange, of the property and nationalist economics of language, but also its geologic temporality, its archelogics. Against or within the “midden,” Bergvall posits the “meddling,” as collective eco-political world-making: “The meddle is collective awareness. Denaturalization of one’s personal and cultural premise. Getting lost. Physical and mental effort. New apprenticeship and transformed commitment” (*Meddle* 19). And elsewhere, Bergvall thinks of “infra-materiality” (from Marcel Duchamp’s idea of “infrathin” performative friction between objects in motion): “Small seemingly unimportant or simply illegible elements in a text turn out to be disturbing and revelatory because they do not seem to belong” (“Infra-materiality” 74). The splintered, leftover scrap of language (say, the Old English thorn – þ) becomes a way of obstructing, if latently, belatedly, the official, hegemonic flow of history. A kind of testimony residually resides in this collapse of ruinous or fugitive material and language.

This proximity of language and materiality keeps Bergvall’s transhistorical poetics from the depoliticised frames of deep time. Through its archaeological and climatological vocabularies, Bergvall’s trilogy may at times evoke a universal human responsibility recalling that described by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his writing on climate history. However, the kind of geological species being that Chakrabarty theorises, “scaling up the imagination of the human” as the universal “we” of the Anthropocene (206), never arrives in Bergvall’s work. Her longue durée charting of materiality, thingification, and ecological violence always concedes colonial, racial, and gendered systems of power.

Bergvall’s latest work, *Alisoun Sings*, strengthens this reading, as Chaucer’s ‘Wife of Bath’ claims her socio-political agency around queer sex, property and textiles among a “scrambljumbl of heavily cross bedded bitching tongues” (4), set within a heavily gendered, wasteful and wasting world-ecological regime: “oceans of trash” (14); “forest of forms” (13); slaughterhouse “death convoys” (32); “excessive London heat” (33); “fracking in Cardiff” (34). “[Even] as histories differ
it’s all of a piece with xenophobico-misogyno-racito-go-to-hell-o’type of worldchew,” Alisoun exclaims (50). The point is not about “scaling up the imagination of the human” but understanding the socio-economic and cultural forces that co-produce the world-ecology. *Alisoun Sings* displays an overt poetic utopianism that appears only latently in the previous texts, as Bergvall’s “trilogy” ends with a manifesto: a desire to “create new transactions” (17) and a faith in poetry as collective bridging (63), as eco-political commons. “Everything in the world began with a yes,” Alisoun repeats again and again, quoting Clarice Lispector.

If Bergvall’s performance poetics translate into an ecological commons it is because the work knows it’s produced by such a commons, which includes not only the richness and diversity of poetic ecologies but also violent conditions of exclusion, unequal distributions and squandering of resources and energy within simultaneously impoverished and over-economised modes of cultural production. In *Alisoun Sings*, Bergvall considers the valuelessness of poetic expression: “my telling totally unreadable, unsharable, certainly quite useless for any sort of more generalised Activision or cultural service, that I was good for now but not for later, and needed to recognise to bow out. That a female’s cultural imprint is on a timer, a temporary quota.” (48).

And at the same time, she can recognise literature’s historical power: “books used to be me forbidden [...] [some] things best wemmen nonderstanden [were left not understood] for fear I mighty speke [...] but once and threw the world into disorder” (35). The ecological world-making of Bergvall’s intermedial poetics depends on its incomplete, agitated and agitative nature, on conflicts, anxieties, exhaustion, but also resourcefulness and interplay, on a collective understanding of art as ecological force.

**Notes**

[i] Since March 2014, Forensic Oceanography’s video installation has travelled to numerous contemporary arts venues around the world. The video turns the report into an 18-minute documentary; its visual, sonic, and narrative aesthetics are undeniable. The interweaving movement of the sea currents has a hypnotic effect while visual data appears and disappears in
the frame. Typical for video artworks and musical performances with ecological and/or climatological overtones, ambient drone noise is employed, connoting elemental and geologic patterns and forces.

Citation


About the Author

Martin Schauss is an Early Career Teaching & Research Fellow of Twentieth-Century Literature in English at the University of Edinburgh. His current research looks at experimental and intermedial literatures in English that have emerged as a response to eco-political crisis points, and teases out the connections between literary production, material environments, resources, and energy. He began this project as an IRC-funded Postdoctoral Research Fellow at University College Dublin. In 2019, he completed his PhD on the politics of materiality in the work of Samuel Beckett and W.G. Sebald at the University of Warwick.

@MJESchauss

Works Cited


https://www.alluvium-journal.org/2021/10/22/ecopoetics-intermediality-caroline-bergvall/


This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.