

# The Vibrancy of Materiality and Otherwise-Than-Place in Susan Gillis's *Obelisk*

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### ABSTRACT

This article proposes a material ecocritical reading of *Obelisk* (2017), a poetry collection by Canadian Susan Gillis (b. 1959) concerned with the impact of human action on Earth in a myriad of forms. Drawing on a wide spectrum of poets, thinkers and artists, including Du Fu, Czeslaw Milosz, Walter Benjamin, John Dixon Hunt, Don McKay, Xi Chuan and Edward Burtynsky, *Obelisk* looks like a palimpsestic essay where Gillis assembles the precious insights of her ancestors to shed light on homo sapiens' intervention into physical space to make the Earth suit human needs. When put together, her heavily annotated and erudite poems read like a denunciation of the indelible mark humans are leaving on the face of the Earth to make it a habitable space, whilst destroying the biosphere in the process. However, there is room in *Obelisk* for a probing reflection on wilderness and place, for a celebration of the vitality of matter and the more-than-human world, for an environmentally-informed critique of the way human action is having a colossal impact on the planet in the geological age of the Anthropocene, and for a meditation on what poetry can do in the light of environmental degradation to encourage humanity to act and live responsibly on Earth. Thus, *Obelisk* warns readers against the destruction of the biosphere and celebrates the persistence of poetry as a form of knowing and as a tool for fashioning an ecological ethics.

### KEYWORDS

Canadian poetry; Susan Gillis; more-than-human world; Anthropocene; vibrant matter; palimpsest; place

### RESUMEN

El presente artículo es una aproximación ecocrítica materialista a *Obelisk* (2017), un poemario de la autora canadiense Susan Gillis (nacida en 1959) que explora las múltiples caras del impacto del ser humano en la Tierra. Inspirado en una amplia nómina de poetas, pensadores y artistas, incluidos Du Fu, Czeslaw Milosz, Walter Benjamin, John Dixon Hunt, Don McKay, Xi Chuan y Edward Burtynsky, *Obelisk* se asemeja a un ensayo a modo de palimpsesto en que Gillis reúne las valiosísimas intuiciones de sus ancestros para arrojar luz sobre la intromisión del ser humano en el espacio físico y convertir así el planeta Tierra en un lugar que satisfaga las necesidades humanas. En su conjunto, los poemas de Gillis, eruditos y prolíficamente anotados, encierran una denuncia de la indeleble huella de la mano humana sobre la faz de la Tierra, como responsable en última instancia de la destrucción de la biosfera. Con todo, en *Obelisk* existe espacio también para una lúcida reflexión sobre la naturaleza y el lugar, para una apología de la vitalidad de la materia y un mundo más que humano, para una crítica encendida del impacto colosal de la acción humana en el planeta en la era geológica del Antropoceno, así como para una meditación acerca de lo que puede llegar a conseguir la poesía a la luz de semejante degradación medioambiental para que la humanidad actúe y viva en la Tierra con sentido de responsabilidad. Así, *Obelisk* advierte al público lector de la destrucción de la biosfera y celebra la persistencia de la poesía como una forma de conocimiento y una herramienta para moldear una ética profundamente ecologista.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Poesía canadiense; Susan Gillis; mundo más que humano; Antropoceno; materia vibrante; palimpsesto; lugar

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## A Poet of the World

Born in 1959 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canadian poet and editor Susan Gillis has published six collections of poetry to date, including *Swimming Among the Ruins* (2000), *Volta* (2002), *Twenty Views of the Lachine Rapids* (2012), *The Rapids* (2012), *Obelisk* (2017), and *Yellow Crane* (2018). A founding member of the collaborative renku poetry collective Yoko's Dogs, with poets Jan Conn, Mary di Michele and Jane Munro, she has also co-authored *Whisk* (2013) and *Rhinoceros* (2016). Acclaimed by critics and scholars as “a formidable poet” and “a gifted poet” (Lavorato np), she has been awarded prestigious literary prizes on the Canadian literary scene over the years. Elegantly printed and handbound as a limited-edition chapbook by Gaspereau Press, *Obelisk* is a beautiful art object and a sequence of poems that respond to the conundrums of the Anthropocene. From the Greek *anthropos* (human) and *cene* (recent), the Anthropocene is the term now widely used to denote our current geological epoch, in which humans are the primary cause of permanent planetary change. It was first coined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote “anthropogenic environmental change, the tangible impact on Earth's ecosystems by human activities” (Bristow 124), in an era when humans affect the Earth more than all other natural forces combined. In light of the poems collected in *Obelisk*, the title of the collection is a deliberate choice. As a human-made thing and cultural artefact, an obelisk stands in sharp contrast to the natural world and, at the same time, it betrays humankind's presence and impact on the physical environment. In other words, it is a constructed memorial of ourselves in place that brings about a change in the nonhuman world.

As Gillis explains in the final acknowledgments section, “*Obelisk* evolved from readings and misreadings (some deliberate, some accidental) in art and nature” (np). In this regard, the collection consists of 25 untitled poems accompanied by footnotes that shed light on the texts, photographs, readings and experiences that originally sparked their composition. The fact that it is a heavily annotated book of poems is reminiscent of a well-known Modernist poetic practice, most notably of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but also of Ezra Pound's “ply over ply” technique, discernible in Gillis's fondness for what might be called *cultural syncretism*. Despite its seeming artlessness and simplicity, Gillis's poetry is erudite and intellectually demanding, a poetry that will not make any concessions whatsoever to banality or a myopic look at the world. She keeps the company of ancestors – literary, artistic and philosophical – from different traditions and thought-worlds, including Du Fu, Kobayashi Issa, Cicero, Wallace Stevens, Walter Benjamin, Czeslaw Milosz, Edward

Burtynsky, John Dixon Hunt, Xi Chuan and Don McKay, who are some of the presences informing a sequence of deeply reflective poems. The brevity thus contrasts sharply with the profundity of thought gathered in this perceptive chapbook.

This article examines *Obelisk* as an exemplar of ecopoetry or Anthropocene lyric by drawing largely on Karen Barad's and Jane Bennett's conceptualisation of matter as being not dead, inert or passive stuff, but alive and agentive instead. In line with fundamental tenets of biosemiotics (Wheeler 2011, 2014) and material ecocriticism concerning the semiotisation of matter or “storied matter” (Iovino and Oppermann, 1), this article suggests that the very palimpsestic texture of Gillis's chapbook attests to (and possibly emulates) the vitality and thing-power that the poet senses as an inbuilt property of matter in the more-than-human world – a world conceived of as a vast material-semiotic network of relationships and as a site of narrativity. Most importantly, the palimpsestic nature of *Obelisk* gestures towards the damage inflicted upon the Earth by human action. In the face of alarming environmental degradation and anthropogenic interventions in the physical world, Gillis succeeds in making a whole out of wholes, out of detritus from the past, in transmitting as an integrity tattered fragments of wisdom, remnants of vision, and bundles of words from her ancestors, as if they had been salvaged from a badly damaged papyrus roll. With dexterity, she weaves the ancestors' words and insights into the living fabric of her poems in the form of echoes, allusions, footnotes or direct quotations. In this respect, in a review of *Yellow Crane*, Laura Ritland writes that “Gillis's poetry stands between the making of meaning (its ‘construction’) and the unravelling or uncertainty of stable meaning (its ‘debris’).”

Ultimately, Gillis's poetry seeks to bear witness to the paradoxes of her times and to act as a catalyst for humans to envision alternative ways of dwelling on Earth with a modicum of grace and responsibility. The poet is not oblivious to “the capacity of environmental texts to model ecocentric thinking” (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 143) and to the power of poems as catalysers for action that quicken environmentalist commitment. Not surprisingly, in the interview “Poet Susan Gillis on Landscapes, Ecologies of the Heart, and Czeslaw Milosz,” Gillis claims that if there is a central question, thematically speaking, to *Yellow Crane* and, by extension, to all her poetry, it concerns “how to live in a world we're simultaneously supported by and are destroying, from the physical environment to social, cultural, political ecologies – not to mention ecologies of the heart.” These words are expressive of her ecocentric mindset.

The same logic applies to *Obelisk*, published just two years before *Yellow Crane*, though the focus in this earlier collection is more on destruction than on the support offered by

the biosphere as a habitable place and a home to human and nonhuman species alike. In light of “the unlikely environments of ecopoetics” (3) as conceptualised by Sarah Nolan in *Unnatural Ecopoetics* (2017), Gillis’ poetry moves away from entirely natural environments towards built spaces in an increasingly technologically-modified contemporary world where there are only blurred boundaries between nature and culture. Upon closer scrutiny, there are at least three thematically distinct categories or clusters of poems in *Obelisk*. The first cluster (1, 16, 18, 19, 21) concerns a celebration of the wilderness as opposed to a nature domesticated by homo sapiens; the second one (2, 7, 8, 14, 20, 22, 23), which is by far the largest and most representative set of poems in the chapbook, explores anthropogenic interventions in the physical world, which result in the destruction of ecosystems and in the pollution of earth, water and air; the third one (poems 6, 11, 12 and 24) dwells on a kind of *ars poetica* and on the relentless impact of time on the Earth as a whole and on human lives in particular. All three clusters form a tightly-woven whole that gestures towards homo sapiens’ hubris in taking dominion over a life-sustaining world. *Obelisk* thus testifies to the unprecedented alarming deterioration of the Earth owing to the destructive practices of dominant capitalist societies, rampantly indifferent to the integrity of the biosphere. In what follows, all three constellations of poems are analysed from an ecocritical perspective with a view to shedding light on Gillis’ poetics, by looking into other poets, thinkers and artists’ influence on her environmentally-sensitive thinking and by scrutinising the way she responds to the vitality of matter in the more-than-human world that homo sapiens is a part of, not apart from.

### Celebrating the Geographies of the Wilderness

Erudite and conversant with the insights of other lucid minds, Gillis is first and foremost an ecopoet. Labels as various as “green poetry” (Gifford, 1995), “environmental poetry” (Scigaj, 1999), “ecological poetry” (Gilcrest, 2002), “ecopoetry” (Scigaj, 1999; Bryson, 2002 and 2005) and “Anthropocene lyric” (Bristow, 2015) have been used by ecocritics to refer to this new species of nature poetry, but the term ‘ecopoetry’ is the most widely used nowadays. According to J. Scott Bryson, ecopoetry is marked by three main characteristics: “an ecological and biocentric perspective recognizing the interdependent nature of the world; a deep humility with regard to our relationships with human and nonhuman nature; and an intense skepticism toward hyperrationality,” leading to the “condemnation of an overtechnologized modern world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe” (*The West Side* 2). Gillis is thus an ecopoet who feels at home in the more-than-human world, one where the boundaries between nature and culture

do not hold any longer, owing to the increasingly blurred divide between self and no-self, subject and object, mind and body, discourse and matter posited by the new materialisms (Coole and Frost 2010). Given humanity’s impact on the world, the physical environment is being “increasingly refashioned by capital, technology, and geopolitics” (Buell, *Writing* 5), so much so that the “‘natural’ and ‘human-built’ dimensions of the palpable world” have become “increasingly indistinguishable” (3). According to Buell, environmental writing is sensitive to the natural world or, to be more precise, to the more-than-human world, one that encompasses both human and nonhuman beings in the larger tapestry of life and mesh of things. Four aspects make a text markedly environmental:

The nonhuman environment is present – not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. [...] The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. [...] Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation. [...] Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (*The Environmental Imagination* 7-8)

In Tom Bristow’s view, the awareness of the existence of a more-than-human world within which human lives are embedded “shifts focus from the significance of human species to transcorporeality and personhood” (2), and, at the same time, counteracts the Cartesian dualism deeply ingrained in the Western mindset, human exceptionalism and instrumentalisation of nature as an exterior or commodity to be exploited in the service of humankind. Trans-corporeality means that *res cogitans* (spirit, mind) is co-extensive with *res extensa* (matter, body). It entails “thinking beyond the life-matter binary” (Bennett 20), for as Karen Barad puts it in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, matter “is not little bits of nature, or a blank slate, surface, or site passively awaiting signification” (151). On the contrary, matter is “not merely a passive substratum, but a *meaning-bearing field of agency*” (Wheeler, “The Biosemiotic” 70) and “the natural world is perfused with signs, meanings, and purposes which are material and which evolve” (Wheeler, “Natural Play” 279). What is more, communication is not the sole prerogative of humanity, as ecophilosopher David Abram observes in *Becoming Animal*: “All things have the capacity for speech – all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings” (172). All the entities populating the world – human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate – are vessels of meaning and so the material world is agentic and capable of conveying meaning as part of “a hybrid, vibrant, and *living world*” (Iovino and Oppermann 3). In short, “all life, not just human life and culture, is semiotic and interpretive” (Wheeler, “Natural Play” 69).





to the world is to experience presence. [...] What lyric perception is *not* conditioned by is the human ego” (L223). Gillis is thus open to the resonance of the Earth as a vast mesh of meaning-making entities. She is also aware that a lifetime will not do to capture the Earth’s richness and interconnectedness, that there is no clear-cut boundary separating the perceiving subject and the perceived world, for everything falls in place as part of a gigantic whole that transcends personhood and affirms *trans-corporeality*, the term used by Stacy Alaimo to refer to the fact that “the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (“Trans-corporeal” 238) in a world of sentient bodies. Gillis would probably willingly embrace the conviction implicit in these other words from “In Milan”:

I have been devouring this world in vain  
For forty years, a thousand would not be enough.  
Yes, I would like to be a poet of the five senses,  
That’s why I don’t allow myself to become one. (Milosz 170)

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Abram argues with great lucidity that sensory perception is expressive of the body’s engagement with the world at its most basic, and also evidence of “the ongoing interweavement” (*Becoming Animal* 58) of our porous bodies with the flesh of the world. As animal bodies, we are part of the living biosphere that we ponder and seek to understand, or, in other words, “we are in and *of* the world” (*Becoming Animal* 72), materially embedded in a vast field of agentic earthly beings – in the thick of earthly life –, and so “[a]ll our knowledge [...] is carnal knowledge, born of the encounter between our flesh and the cacophonous landscape we inhabit” (*Becoming Animal* 72) and absorb through our senses.

In poem 16, Gillis’s act of writing the poem is tantamount to an act of recording what is going on around her with great attentiveness. She notices that “four deer crossed the field” (*Obelisk* np) very fast and then they were simply gone. The verbal artefact that the poem is succeeds in conveying through the medium of words the immeasurability and lushness of the wilderness. At any rate, the presence of the wilderness in the form of four deer come out of the blue has a revelatory nature for Gillis. It is a moment with the texture of transcendence, a fleeting instant of revelation when the poet is endowed with heightened perception or sensory powers. Looking at the world as if with an enhanced awareness, the thought dawns on her that, in the wilderness, every element is related to everything else along a continuum of existence. Every little detail betrays infinitude and the world reveals itself to be a good place to live in:

The field is bare again, but the stubble in it is thicker. The woods that border it have spread open. I can see every stump, every sapling, every fallen limb. Everything’s brightened. Everything’s more of itself. (*Obelisk* np)

Bennett’s intellectual project in *Vibrant Matter* amounts to nothing more and nothing less than to “theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality” and to make visible the “material vitality” (xiii, 55) of all nonhuman forces, ranging from blizzards to metals, power plants to information networks. Paying attention to the more-than-human world with a maximum of intensity, Gillis’s omnivorous sensibility uncovers a plethora of particulars at macro and micro-levels. These lines from poem 16 show her responding to the vitality of the world and the thing-power of confederations of agentive entities that form spontaneous networks, i.e., materialities that are “kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relationships” (Bennett 13) in the midst of the wilderness. In this respect, Robert Bringham defines the wild as “everything that grows and breeds and functions without supervision or imposed control” (12), and “not a portfolio of resources for us or our species to buy and sell or manage or squander as we please” (12).

Poem 18 borrows a line from a well-known poem by Kobayashi Issa as a starting point for the whole composition. Gillis notes the following in a footnote: “Some versions of Issa’s poem put a capital H on ‘hell’”:

*In this life we walk on the roof of hell, gazing at flowers.*

Walking the flattened grass, are we walking the deer’s path or are they walking ours?

Geese low overhead en route to Willow Pond – what’s a house to them? (Gillis, *Obelisk* np; italics in the original)

Despite the brevity of the lines quoted, they hide a wealth of ecological implications. Gillis expresses awe in the presence of the grandeur and beauty of the more-than-human world, though she is also aware of the short-sightedness of humans, gazing at flowers from the roof of hell, which is possibly meant as a reference to life made unbearable by myopic decisions. Following closely the deer’s tracks on the grass, Gillis wonders whether it is us humans that are tracing those marks left by the nonhuman other or it is rather the other way around, which is tantamount to radically questioning the supremacy of homo sapiens in the hierarchy of being and, at the same time, affirming the interconnectedness

of existence along a biocentric (not anthropocentric) continuum encompassing the human and the nonhuman on an equal plane. Meanwhile, geese are flying overhead on their way to a pond, for there is no need for them to have a physical home in human terms. A house is nothing to them, as the biosphere is their dwelling and the Earth in its entirety is *oikos*. What is most remarkable about poem 18 is that it shows Gillis paying ecological attention to and reading the book of nature, since, in a vibrant world of agentive and expressive entities, conceived of as a “web teeming with meanings” (Wheeler, “The Biosemiotic” 270), there is much reading and writing going on. The world’s phenomena are all in perpetual relation to each other and life is an embodied process of understanding that engages all beings, “from the humblest forms of single-cell life upwards” (Wheeler, “The Biosemiotic” 279).

Finally, poem 19 is a Whitmanesque, all-encompassing catalogue of the world that Gillis wishes to celebrate in all its splendour as a poet of the senses. The catalogue lists a wide spectrum of human-induced transformations of the physical world to make it habitable through the medium of technology, even if those transformations entail the destruction of the world they seek to shape to conform to human needs:

Yes, I would like to be a poet of the world,

of train wrecks, oils spills, ravaged lands, desecrated bodies,  
whole languages forbidden and excised,  
of the demented and the near extinct, of extraction, transgression,

of the canyon after a landslide, the flooded urban plain,

a circle of people bigger than a pipeline, tent camps with tanks of  
clean water, rebuilt rooms of a burned-out town,

ululatory. (Gillis, *Obelisk* np)

In *naturecultures*, to borrow Donna Haraway’s (2003, 2008) term to refer to a hybrid where culture and nature stop being asunder, the physical environment is transformed by human action and inscribed into “a material-semiotic network of human and nonhuman agents incessantly generating the world’s embodiments and events” (Iovino and Oppermann 3). Gillis wishes to be a multivocal poet capable of composing poems that emulate the vitality of a many-voiced world that comprises intra-acting human and nonhuman entities, all of them enmeshed in “the world’s [shared] becoming” (Barad 803).

## The Indelible Human Signature on the Earth

The biosphere is the home life has built for itself; it is where all the living forms making up the symposium of the whole celebrate the joy of presence and the thrill of being alive. A composition central to *Obelisk*, poem 2 shows Gillis drawing on the lessons she has learnt about the more-than-human world from such fine minds as Cicero, John Dixon Hunt, Walter Benjamin and Don McKay in the hope of spurring deep thinking on the lasting (often indelible) marks left by human action upon the Earth. As revealed by the footnote accompanying the poem, the textual sources that have inspired Gillis in composing this lyric include John Dixon Hunt’s *Gardens and the Picturesque*, Don McKay’s essay “Otherwise than Place” on the meaning of place, and Walter Benjamin’s well-known passage in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* on Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*. Based on these sources, Gillis comes up with a composition that is a constellation of precious insights into nature, place and homo sapiens’ impact on the physical world garnered from very diverse thinkers. According to Dixon Hunt, “Cicero termed what we would call the cultural landscape a second nature” (Gillis, *Obelisk* np). He elaborates on the notion of “second nature”:

Cicero’s phrase

‘a second nature’ of course implies a first; though he does not specify this, we may take it that he implies a primal nature, an unmediated world before humans invaded, altered, and augmented it, a world without any roads, ports, paths, terraces, vineyards, etc. Today we might call it the wilderness. (Gillis, *Obelisk* np)

Cicero’s, and Dixon Hunt’s, meditation on nature is anthropocentric, one where homo sapiens remains the measuring rod of all things. “It’s impossible to be alive and not to have some kind of imprint on the world” (qtd in Gillis, *Obelisk* np), writes Dixon Hunt, and that is the essence of his message. In the geological epoch following the Holocene that has been called ‘Anthropocene,’ and in light of the current alarming environmental degradation, we are more sensitive than ever before to the impact (and disastrous consequences) of human action on the planet. Humankind has altered the face of the Earth in an infinity of ways, by constructing “bridges, roads, harbours, fields” (Gillis, *Obelisk* np) to make physical space more habitable – to make *space* into *place* in cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s conceptualisation.<sup>1</sup> According to Gillis, Benjamin says: “This is *exactly* how one

<sup>1</sup> Tuan draws a most useful distinction between *space* and *place*. He observes that “‘space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’ What begins as an undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6). Put simply, “enclosed and humanized space is place” (54).

pictures the angel of history!" (*Obelisk* np), which is expressive of the relentless incursions of humankind into the wilderness and its complete transformation to suit our needs. By contrast, McKay enters Gillis's meditation at this point with a gnomic (Earth-centred) definition of place lifted from "Otherwise Than Place." In his biocentric (as opposed to anthropocentric) prose meditation on the world, McKay risks an anti-humanistic definition of place and suggests shedding all "co-ordinates of place and identity" (25) as one advances towards merging with the wilderness. He writes:

Suppose we try to define place without using the usual humanistic terms – not home and native land, not little house on the prairie, not even the founding principle of our sense of beauty – but as a function of the wilderness. Try this: 'place is wilderness to which history has happened.' Or: 'place is land to which we have occurred.' (17)

Otherwise-than-place, oblivion, geologic time: to contemplate any of these is to countenance our own erasures without rage or despair. [This practice is] good meditative medicine, an antidote to our tendency to make places into permanent memorials of ourselves, whether by monumental construction or unforgettable destruction. (25)

It is always wilderness that precedes and predates place. Wilderness is the true mother of place. Homo sapiens has occurred to wilderness and made it into place by transforming it in manifold ways. "What's needed is, I think, a small dose of this eros of oblivion, the capacity to think backward or forward from place to its mothering wilderness" (26), writes McKay. Of course, this entails dispelling the humankind/natural world hierarchy, countering human exceptionalism, and foregrounding the transformative (often destructive) power inherent in human action, and favouring a biocentric mindset whose very foundations rest on a vivid awareness of trans-corporeality, porosity, interconnectedness, the materiality of physical existence and the agentic power of *storied* matter.

Many of the poems collected in *Obelisk* delineate humankind's destructive imprint on the world –i.e., on what humans take to be inert or dead matter, devoid of agency and intentionality. After all, as Bennett argues, a view of the nonhuman world as passive or inanimate matter "feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (*Vibrant Matter* ix), which partly accounts for the alarming degradation of the biosphere in the Anthropocene. In this respect, poem 7, consisting of only two lines, is crystal clear and eloquent: "Amenable, tolerable, useful, pleasant, beautiful, ravaged, ruined. / We regard the land" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np). The accompanying footnote clarifies the sense of this long list of adjectives, as well as the textual source Gillis has lifted it from: "This list of adjectives applied by John Dixon Hunt to the human impact on land is

chillingly accurate, and not just in terms of gardens. Try applying the list to other things – oh, say, women's bodies" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np). Land colonisation is co-extensive with other forms of violent domination, including the one that takes possession of or abuses women's bodies. Subsequent poems in the chapbook explore different manifestations of human impact and destructive practices in late capitalist societies involved in air, water and land abuse and overexploitation. For instance, poems 8, 22 and 23 are concerned with the biospheric expulsions described by sociologist Saskia Sassen in *Expulsions* (2014) that occur in mining and other environment-threatening practices instigated by homo sapiens' hubris. Accelerated violent incursions into the physical world result in "the expulsion of bits of the biosphere from their life space" (Sassen 5), with catastrophic effects on human communities, particularly those living already in very precarious conditions. According to Sassen, these expulsions from a life space are prompted not by "an individual's, a firm's, or a government's decision or action," but by what she terms 'predatory formations', i.e., "larger assemblages of elements, conditions, and mutually reinforcing dynamics" (77) in capitalist societies that are intent on profit-making and indifferent to human dignity and the preservation of the biosphere. In this regard, finding inspiration in the "large scale chromagenic prints in the mid 1990s" with which Toronto-based photographer Edward Burtynsky "documented the impact of uranium mines at Elliot Lake, Ontario" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np), poem 8 depicts how the planet's entrails are stripped of their wealth:

The lowland might have been rendered with a palette knife,  
sludge white lavished, then scraped and etched into

burnt spindles of trees in a ragged trough  
flanked by igneous rock, a few yellow spruce hanging on. (Gillis, *Obelisk* np)

The result is a "devastated valley," where "three lengths of pipe take shape among the trees" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np), with the physical world being completely transformed by human entry into an otherwise pristine landscape. Havoc and destruction have many different faces, though. Poem 22 concerns the exploitation of gold mines in Brazil, whereas poem 23 explores the Tatlock quarry in the Lanark Highlands, which "occupies a huge swath of land where white marble is extracted and trucked 47 km to the Omya plant for further processing" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np). An aerial view of the site reveals an otherworldly landscape of devastation, where the Earth's resources have been commodified and matter has been metamorphosed into passive, inert stuff: "The quarry spreads out in a wide crescent, a white sea, a drained sea, a / gash, a crater, a moonscape with roads and stationary machines like / toys, a carved marble stage set for a play" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np).



The most evocative composition in *Obelisk*, poem 14, explores anthropogenic impacts on water and rivers through the feats of modern engineering. In the accompanying footnote, Gillis reveals the two sources where she found inspiration for this piece and suggests further reading<sup>2</sup> on the topic. First, Gillis turns to a poem written by Du Fu in the eighth century as the opening piece of a sequence known as “Autumn Meditations,” where the Chinese poet evokes the rhythms of village life in tune with the rhythms of the natural world. And second, the poet finds inspiration in yet another photograph by Burtynsky, entitled *Dam No. 2*, featuring the Three Gorges Dam, one of the mega dams built in China at the turn of the century. The building of mega dams in the 21st century is reported to have had a huge impact on the environment in general and on river ecosystems in particular. Some nations, like India, have boasted dam construction along their rivers as a sign of technological progress and development. China is no exception to this sentiment of national self-aggrandisement either. A monumental project considered a social and economic success in the Chinese government’s eyes, the Three Gorges Dam is a hydroelectric gravity dam across the Yangtze River in Hubei province, China, and the world’s largest power station in terms of installed capacity. Begun in 1994 and fully functional as of 2012, its construction displaced and relocated approximately 1.13 million people, flooded fertile agricultural land as well as invaluable archaeological and historic sites, and had a tremendous impact on the environment, with an increased risk of landslides. In this respect, in *Slow Violence* (2011), Rob Nixon, concerned with the environmentalism of the poor, has eloquently demonstrated how the slow violence intrinsic in environmental degradation is “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2), striking mostly those who are already dispossessed or living in poor conditions in developing countries of the Global South. Drawing on Du Fu and Burtynsky for inspiration, Gillis comes up with a meditative lyric on the half idyllic, half devastated riverscape around the dam across the gigantic Yangtze River vividly depicted by Burtynsky’s fine art photograph *Dam No. 2*:

Mist over the river mirrored in the river.

Distant hills rising behind distant hills, blue resolving to pink in

<sup>2</sup> Gillis recommends a poem by Robert Hass titled “Ezra Pound’s Proposition,” collected in *Time and Materials. Poems 1997-2005*, which deals with another mega dam, Pak Mun Dam, in Thailand. It sexualises Earth’s economy or productive capacity and underscores how the late capitalist logic of corporate and economic forces ultimately expels individuals from the system and ruins the environment in the process. Its opening lines read thus: “Beauty is sexual, and sexuality / Is the fertility of the earth and the fertility / Of the earth is economics” (81).

the dawn mist.

Everything curves away from the dam, even the island, barren except for equipment, the yellow shed, bright tarps, narrow road, power lines.

The dam’s unfinished end gapes.

Cranes sit idle on its face and ridge.

It’s the kind of scene you might find on paper money. (*Obelisk* np)

Burtynsky’s camera has documented human destruction of the Earth, i.e., a myriad of human-induced transformations of the physical world, ranging from terraforming of the earth (through industrialisation, mining, quarries, urbanisation, and industrial agriculture), the ubiquitous presence of plastic, concrete and other technofossils around the globe, carbon dioxide emissions and the acidification of oceans, through deforestation, massive species extinction, shipbreaking, tailings and railcuts, to “large-scale incursions imposed upon the earth to harness and divert the power of water” (Burtynsky, “Official Website”), from modern canals for diverting waterways to gigantic hydroelectric dam projects. Burtynsky’s ultimate concern is the resulting degradation of our environment implicit in the process of making and constructing things on a finite, vulnerable planet that is being assailed from all directions by mass consumerism and the unappeasable hunger of a civilisation intent on “reshaping the Earth in colossal ways” (Ibid.). Hence, his art bears witness to the effects of the Anthropocene, in the hope that his photographs will spur deep reflection on our way of relating to the more-than-human world and on the often invisible (or unnoticed) cumulative effects of civilisation’s transformation of the planet. An artistic project of a lifetime, Burtynsky’s photographs capture organic ecosystems, patterns and altered geographies and betray his interest in making visible “the indelible marks left by humankind on the geological face of our planet” (Burtynsky, “Official Website”), as well as his determination to inspire a deeper environmental debate. In a lucid essay entitled “Life in the Anthropocene,” published in the multidisciplinary project *Anthropocene* as well as on his official website, the photographer writes:

My earliest understanding of deep time and our relationship to the geological history of the planet came from my passion for being in nature. [...] Our planet has borne witness to five great extinction events, and these have been prompted by a variety

of causes: a colossal meteor impact, massive volcanic eruptions, and oceanic cyanobacteria activity that generated a deadly toxicity in the atmosphere. These were the naturally occurring phenomena governing life's ebb and flow. Now it is becoming clear that humankind, with its population explosion, industry, and technology, has in a very short period of time also become an agent of immense global change. [...] Our planetary system is affected by a magnitude of force as powerful as any naturally occurring global catastrophe, but one caused solely by the activity of a single species: us.

What Gillis accomplishes in poem 14 is an act of ekphrasis whereby she translates Burtynsky's visual art object titled *Dam no. 2* into a verbal artefact of lasting aesthetic value. Past and present are fused together as Burtynsky's photograph is set against a poem by one of the greatest classical Chinese poets. Echoes from Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu's opening poem in his "Autumn Meditations,"<sup>3</sup> composed in 766, on the pounding of clothes near the river in preparation for wintertime, are heard at the end of Gillis's poems, in lines of terse simplicity, almost some 13 centuries later. The overall picture is one of stasis and tranquillity, of communal life following the rhythms of the seasons, which stands in stark contrast to the violence exerted upon the Earth by the construction of a mega dam across the Yangtze River. Where once Du Fu's ears paid attention to the pounding of clothes in a village upriver, some centuries later Burtynsky's gaze would fix on the havoc and destruction brought about by humans' hubris and compulsion to take dominion over the nonhuman world:

A minuscule barge crosses.

Upriver, in a house near the shore, Du Fu listens to the steady pounding high in the hills of village being dismantled, dreaming of river dolphins safe beneath the waves. (Gillis, *Obelisk* np)

3 The opening piece in Du Fu's "Autumn Meditations" reads thus:

Jade dew withers and wounds the groves of maple trees,  
On Wu mountain, in Wu gorge, the air is dull and drear.  
On the river surging waves rise to meet the sky,  
Above the pass wind and cloud join the earth with darkness.  
Chrysanthemum bushes open twice, weeping for their days,  
A lonely boat, a single line, my heart is full of home.  
Winter clothes everywhere are urgently cut and measured,  
Baidicheng above, the evening's driven by beating on stones. (Hinton 81)

Time stands still now. No centuries separate Du Fu from Burtynsky. Where the latter sees the disturbing mark of technology upon the environment, the former, practising a poetics of listening, is intent on capturing the polyphony of the green world, where the human and the nonhuman stand side by side, coexisting on democratic terms in the living mesh of things. Meanwhile, dolphins swim safely, oblivious to human commerce, and the dam becomes a "conduit for deep time" (Farrier 3) whereby humankind makes itself palpable and leaves an enduring trace in the landscape that will persist into the deep future. The dam becomes thus not just a centrifugal sign that betrays human presence "in the form of anthropogenic landscapes, durable materials, and altered ecosystems," but also "a fabulous, even mythic injunction [...] pointing our attention back to the ground we stand on and that sustains us" (Farrier 3).

### Ars Poetica: Poetry Redeeming the World

In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Huggan and Tiffin do not hesitate to highlight "the capacity of poetry to counteract the instrumentalism of hyper-rationalist and materialistic values and to celebrate 'the totality of nature' by engaging with human feelings and sympathies in a broadly intersubjective, mutually beneficial way" (104). They have powerful reasons to believe in the transformative capacity of the kind of imaginative writing that poetry is. Like all environmentally-sensitive literary texts, ecopoetry has the "capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world" (Huggan and Tiffin 14) or, in other words, to move human conscience to action and commitment in the face of climate crisis. In this regard, in her forceful manifesto "Bring Your Shovel!," Alaimo advocates undertaking "mundane revolutionary practices that foster intersubjective well-being through a million minute attempts to foster the resilience of ecosystems, the survival of species, the just distribution of health, wealth and opportunity" (np), as environmental justice is inseparable from social justice. Poetry might not have the power to redeem the world, but it can be a very potent catalyst for action. It might show us the path to follow in rethinking how we relate to a more-than-human world that encompasses a myriad of creatures that form part of the flesh of the Earth and need our attention and respect. In Farrier's words, poetry can, in fact, "model an Anthropocenic perspective in which our sense of relationship and proximity (and from this, our ethics) is stretched and tested against the Anthropocene's warping effects" (8). Undoubtedly, there are alternative ways to dwell on this planet, with a sense of duty and responsibility. Gillis might be said to be part of that community of ecopoets that seek to spur reflection on the unbearable (and unsustainable) impact of human action on the world. She is not indifferent to the ethical dimension intrinsic in poetry

as an epistemological tool, as a mode of knowing reality, and as a pragmatic tool to change the world for the better. Therefore, it is no wonder that *Obelisk* should be punctuated by a sort of sustained meditation of a metaliterary nature where Gillis thinks deeply about the social function and ethical mission of poetry. Thus, in poem 6 she draws on the thinking of one of the most eminent contemporary Chinese poets, Xi Chuan, to dwell on the difficulty inherent in writing honest poetry that bears witness to one's historical time, whilst remaining open to the vibrancy of the material world in the tiniest of its details:

In speaking about his predecessor, Xi Chuan says, "It's really difficult to be a poet! You have to develop such sensitive ears that you are able to catch the slightest sound made by a needle falling down to the ground." (Gillis, *Obelisk* np)

The predecessor Chuan refers to, Gillis informs us in a footnote, is Sikong Tu (837-908), who compiled a catalogue where he drew a complete taxonomy of different writing styles: "1, Potent, Undifferentiated; 2, Limpid and Calm; 3 Delicate-Fresh and Rich-Lush; 4, Firm and Self-Possessed; 5, Lofty and Ancient; 6, Decorous and Dignified; and so on" (*Obelisk* np). Style is precisely what defines the singularity of a poet's voice. According to Chuan, the roots or buds of style are to be found in a wide spectrum of seemingly unconnected elements: "in human sufferings, weaknesses, the brightness and darkness of nature, the shadows of philosophy, social changes.... History and reality are themselves inventing a kind of literature" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np). Like their predecessor Milosz, Chuan and Gillis are intent on writing poems that capture the conundrums of their times, overtly denouncing destructive practices, and pushing people to take action in their respective life spheres. The destruction of the biosphere and the slow violence implicit in environmental degradation – brought about by the complicity of predatory formations in the capitalist system and the colossal intrusions of homo sapiens into physical space – are cases in point. Awakening readers' conscience to responsible action is thus Gillis's ultimate goal in *Obelisk*, where she brings to attention the manifold ways of terraforming, i.e., the deliberate transformation of the Earth to suit human needs.

In poem 11, Gillis turns to Xi Chuan once again to emphasise the importance of writing about one's times with a deep sense of honesty: "Honesty means scraping your sense of reality to the bone. / Loyalty is even more brutal" (*Obelisk* np). Poetry is not about escapism or self-expression in Chuan's and Gillis's *ars poetica*, but rather an Eliotian escape from personality. The note accompanying this poem is eloquent enough: "In Xi Chuan's formulation, honesty equates with loyalty. [...] [E]xtrapolate it outward, and I arrive at Hannah Arendt's Eichmann, *just following orders*, or the mass violence inflicted

by patriots on any dehumanized populace" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np). Far from being locked up in their ivory tower, poets like Gillis and Chuan feel that poetry has an all-important mission to fulfil in the world by engaging with the ethical fashioning of a society and instilling empathy, intelligence and grace in individuals' minds. Turning their back on this responsibility would be tantamount to acknowledging that poetry is nothing but pretty words hybridised on the form of language, not a form of knowing, tackling fundamental questions, and understanding the nature of reality.

In poem 12, Gillis evokes Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar,"<sup>4</sup> a well-known poem from *Harmonium* (1923), where the American Modernist poet juxtaposes another human-made thing on a hill (a jar) with the wilderness – with place untouched by history, as McKay suggests in his non-anthropocentric definition of wilderness. In Gillis's poem, the obelisk is placed not on a hill, but in a wood instead: "An obelisk in a wood, a jar in Tennessee" (*Obelisk* np). It appears to fulfil the same poetic function, though. The obelisk, like the jar, stands for human imagination and the power of intelligence to take dominion over the world in its epistemological confrontation with the real. This is all about *knowing as a form of ownership*, not as a form of primarily acknowledging the interconnectedness and unknowability of what-is, for the human mind is prone to taking possession of what it knows. Confronted with a large obelisk set in a wood, the lyric self cannot but feel overwhelmed and describe it in seemingly paradoxical terms. It is as if both sets of adjectives were also implicitly juxtaposing wilderness and civilisation. An obelisk in the midst of a wood is a somewhat alien presence that gestures towards *rule, order, law* and everything that is human or human-made: "Hello large, unreachable, disturbing, dangerous, hostile, / discomfiting, raw. Meet norm, custom, habit, manner, rule, / order, law" (Gillis, *Obelisk* np).

Poem 24, the penultimate composition in *Obelisk*, is an accomplished meditation on time. The poetic self asks "What do I know of the time before houses?" and what comes next is a probing reflection on dwelling à la Heidegger and on the conquest of space by history à la McKay. Life happens not only in space, but also in time. As Gillis observes in a footnote apropos this poem, "During our lives, time unfolds, unfolds, unfolds, as in a landslide or sinkhole. And then it ends – for us, anyway. It's complicated: the world unfolds to enfold us. There's no way we're not implicated in this" (*Obelisk* np). What poem 24 offers is a short history of humanity that looks at how houses have evolved over time as a potent

4 The first two stanzas of Stevens's memorable poem read thus: "I placed a jar in Tennessee / And round it was, upon a hill. / It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill. // The wilderness rose up to it, / And sprawled around, no longer wild. / The jar was round upon the ground / And tall and of a port in air" (76).

symbol for warmth and protection in the face of homo sapiens' exposure to the elements, i.e., the domestication of space through technology thanks to human ingenuity. As if she were present at the beginning of architecture, Gillis muses thus on the first house:

The first house had no eaves.

Then houses began to have porches, where it became pleasant to take a warm or cool drink of an evening.

Dappled light on the walls seemed a reflection of their time before houses, the forest waving its leaves, beauty and shelter among its many gifts. (*Obelisk* np)

For the rest of the poem, Gillis captures with her senses wide open to the world the vitality intrinsic to matter, which, far from being inert or dead, is endowed with an agency of its own. What her senses perceive is a vast spectrum of sensory stimuli: the shifting light moving across the surface of things, "the watery leaf-shapes on the cedar planks," the scent of cedar, "the frisson of crickets and occasional bull-frog blurt," the sun setting on the horizon, the light on the house eaves, and a crow calling. The world is breathing and alive, a subtle network of material-semiotic connections, and Gillis appears to be intent on capturing all these tiny details before they vanish for good with the setting sun. However, space and time go hand in hand in humans' experience of the world which they are *a part of*, not *apart from*. Thus, the poet also registers the passage of time, which could be a matter of minutes or a matter of millennia, as she reminisces about the first fire round which humans might have gathered in prehistoric times: "In a few minutes I'll get up and go in and light the stove. It might / be the first fire in a pit in the first house but for the door, and / everything else that came after" (*Obelisk* np). Gillis gestures here towards deep, geological time by subtly evoking humans' impact on the Earth over eons of time. Most importantly, the cosmos is seen as a confederation of nonhuman bodies and things that have the capacity "to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett viii). Matter is not passive or simply acted upon, but agentive and expressive instead, and as such it has the capacity to play a role in the fabric of the universe. "The sun sets. / Here on the porch, the breeze picks up. Shadows close. The small / sounds of breathing" (*Obelisk* np), writes Gillis, conveying the ebb and flow implicit in a breathing cosmos.

The singularity of what Abram calls a "Commonwealth of Breath" ("Afterword" 313), the *small sounds of breathing*, both human and nonhuman, are the ones Gillis captures

in *Obelisk*. Whereas human action leaves an indelible impact on the face of the Earth, she seeks to gently record the flux implicit in life, in the luminous details of the more-than-human world, where human agency coexists with thing-power and the capacity of everything that exists to mean something. *Signatura rerum*: there are signs in the world needing no verbal tradition. *Obelisk* is ultimately a complex collection of 25 poems that are a celebration of the wilderness and a warning against environmental degradation, a probing meditation on the webbed texture of reality, and a denunciation of the havoc caused by human hubris in dominant capitalist societies. Gillis's mission as a poet loyal to her sense of reality and sensitive to her times is to educate our intelligence and instil in us a sense of duty and responsibility in our way of relating to the Earth.

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