

On Affect and Ecopoetics

Sobre el afecto y la ecopoética

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I aim to contribute to the discussion on the convergence between ecocriticism, especially in its new materialist strands, and affect studies, by focusing on their applicability to the study of poetry. Drawing on Jane Bennett, I set out to explore the potential of poetry to imagine the worlds beyond the anthropocentric, as well as to engender attentiveness to the nonhuman as proposed in new materialisms. I contend that Bennett's theorization of affect, vibrant matter, and her model of influx-and-efflux, can be fruitfully thought of in connection to what the writer and scholar Julia Fiedorczuk conceptualizes as ecopoetics. In particular, and addressing Fiedorczuk's ecocriticism and poetic practice, this paper will understand ecopoetics as a means of inducing «an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality» (Bennett, 2010: x), and it will raise questions about how to write an «I» in a world of vibrant matter.

Key words: affect, ecopoetics, Julia Fiedorczuk, vibrant matter, non-anthropocentric poetry, influx-and-efflux.

RESUMEN: El objetivo de este artículo es contribuir al debate sobre las convergencias entre los estudios sobre el afecto (*affect studies*) y la ecocrítica, especialmente en las vertientes neomaterialistas, centrándose en su aplicabilidad al estudio de la poesía. Partiendo del pensamiento de Jane Bennett, el artículo plantea preguntas sobre el potencial de la poesía para imaginar mundos más allá de lo antropocéntrico, generando una atención (*attentiveness*) hacia lo no humano, tal y como se propone en los nuevos materialismos. La teorización del afecto y de la materia vibrante, así como el modelo de «influx-and-efflux» de Bennett, pueden ser pensados de manera fructífera en relación con lo que la escritora y teórica Julia Fiedorczuk denomina «ecopoética». Explorando tanto el

pensamiento ecocrítico como la práctica poética de Fiedorczuk, este artículo conceptualiza la ecopoética como una manera de inducir «una apertura estético-afectiva hacia la vitalidad material» (Bennett, 2010: x) y plantea preguntas sobre cómo escribir el «yo» en el mundo de la materia vibrante.

Palabras clave: afecto, ecopoética, Julia Fiedorczuk, materia vibrante, poesía no antropocéntrica, *influx-and-efflux*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed a renewed interdisciplinary interest in theorizations of affect, emotion and materiality. There are several important convergences in the relatively simultaneous affective turn in the humanities and social sciences (Clough, 2007),¹ and the material turn as articulated in ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann, 2014).² Affect theory, like material ecocriticism, appears in part as a response to social constructivism and what has been often referred to as the poststructuralist overemphasis on discourse. As Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino point out in their introduction to *Affective Ecocriticism*, both theoretical turns «recuperate terms that had long found themselves on the denigrated side of entrenched Cartesian dualisms: if ‘emotion’ was theoretically suspect before the affective turn, ‘nature’ was just as suspect prior to the emergence of ecocriticism» (2018: 4). Despite a number of differences between these two frameworks,³ in fact, they share much common ground, mostly in their consistent questioning of «discrete notions of embodied selfhood» and their focus on «the trajectories of transcorporeal encounters that are intricate and dynamic» (2018: 8).

Several critical voices have been raised against the affect and new materialist theorists. The emphasis on «newness» and «turn» has been questioned by Sara Ahmed (2008), Clare Hemmings (2005) and Clara Fischer (2016), among other thinkers, who highlight how it risks erasure of an ongoing engagement with affect, emotion and materiality in feminist studies. Furthermore, as Fischer argues in her analysis of recent feminist theorizing on affect and materiality, these approaches do not always «provide anti-dualistic and holistic ways of thinking about the body, mind, culture, language, and emotion» (2018: 84). That is, their «revaluing of nature, materiality, and affect or emotion often results in an atomism and a reversal of the very dualisms [they claim] to undermine, as bodily immanence and affect take priority over cognition and culture» (2018: 85–86).

¹ The turn to affect has culminated in several theoretical «orientations», ranging from philosophy, neuroscience to cultural theory. *The Affect Theory Reader* distinguishes eight «affectual orientations», but at the same time it recognizes that affect theory may take «infinitely multiple iterations» (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 4). On the transdisciplinary broadness of the concept of «affect» and its possible applications to the study of poetry, especially in the context of Catalan Literary Studies, see Margalida Pons (2021).

² Here I am referring mostly to the so-called new materialisms. As Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino rightly observe, «materialism is not exactly ‘new’ to ecocriticism, though it has taken on greater significance in recent years as new materialist projects develop» (2018: 7). The material turn in ecocriticism is associated with several publications appearing in the late 2000s (Barad, 2007; Alaimo, 2010; Bennett, 2010), often in dialogue with the works of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway. See also Coole and Frost (2010).

³ As Bladow and Ladino argue, «affect theorists have tended to prioritize affect within and in relation to bodies and to overlook the environment’s role in shaping it, [while] ecocritics have too often neglected the affectivity of human bodies in their eagerness to champion greater attention to the more-than-human world» (2018: 3-4).

For instance, Brian Massumi's (2002) work, which figures in many affect studies, is criticised for elevating spontaneous, bodily affect at the expense of cognition, thus contributing to the fortification of the customary distinction between thought and feeling, and ultimately, between culture and nature (Hemmings, 2005; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012; among others).⁴ In turn, new materialist scholars, such as Elizabeth Grosz, Karen Barad, Vicki Kirby or Stacy Alaimo, have reinstated nature and matter as a privileged site of feminist exploration, yet in the process, according to Sara Ahmed, they have reduced the complex heterogeneity of earlier feminist thought to «anti-biologism» (Ahmed, 2008).

Arguably, however, most affect theorists are driven by a non-binary comprehension of affect (emotion) and thought (cognition). Further, scholars engaging with new materialism develop non-reductive frameworks for rethinking nature and matter by conceptualizing nature and culture as radically inseparable parts of a dynamic continuum (following Haraway's [2003] term *naturecultures*) – a continuum that dissolves conventional dichotomies of life and matter, subjective and objective, organic and inorganic. Barad's proposed concept of «intra-action» (that is, «the mutual constitution of object and agencies of observation within phenomena»), as opposed to «interaction», which presupposes prior entities) is seen as both «physical» and «conceptual», «material» and «discursive» (2007: 196–197). Alaimo's (2010) posthumanist notion of «trans-corporeality» implies that all creatures, including human beings, are not only profoundly interrelated, but also inextricably enmeshed with the dynamic, material, more-than-human world (with bacteria, viruses, parasites, pollution, toxic waste, and so on). The new materialist work of Barad and Alaimo, as well as other scholars, such as Jane Bennett (2010), puts forward our inseparability from the environment (thus questioning the very notion of the environment, understood as something that «environs»),⁵ and, crucially, it also refigures the nonhuman or more-than-human matter as vibrant and agentic. Drawing from Spinozist, Deleuzian, Nietzschean and vitalist traditions, Bennett argues for «a more *distributive* agency», as part of a larger project of «dissipat[ing] the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic» (2010: ix–x, emphasis in original).

Affect – especially in Spinozist-Deleuzian orientations, which understand it «as an entire, vital, and modulating field of myriad becomings across human and nonhuman»⁶ – is key in these theorizations. In Bennett's reassessment of matter and its agency, the affective is often merged with the material: «What I am calling impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a spiritual supplement or 'life force' added to the matter said to house it. [...] I equate affect with materiality, rather than posit a separate force that can enter and animate a physical body» (2010: xiii). Affect should not be understood, then, as an individualized emotion, compassion or empathy⁷ – which, as a product of human

⁴ Another thorny issue is the distinction between affect and emotion. See, for instance, Fischer (2016).

⁵ As Sean Cubitt argues: «Environment presumes something that environs and something envired. It seems safe to presume that the only ones talking about enviring are human and that the environment is the nonhuman that surrounds them» (2019).

⁶ See Gregg and Seigworth (2010: 6). This orientation is usually associated with the nonhuman turn and non-Cartesian traditions in philosophy. According to the editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, we can include here feminist work (Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens), philosophically inflected cultural studies (Lawrence Grossberg, Meaghan Morris, Brian Massumi) and political philosophy (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri), among other thinkers.

⁷ One could also include here sympathetic concern, yet another term that has been problematized by feminist and postcolonial scholars, as it reproduces the hierarchical opposition between subject and object, where the sympathetic attention necessarily fetishizes the Other. However, it is worth mentioning that in her *Influx & Efflux*, and thinking with Walt Whitman, Jane Bennett (2020) understands the concept of sympathy not as a Christian virtue or moral sentiment, but as more-than-human atmospheric forces (thus once again merging the affective and the material). For Whitman, the term can mark «an atmospherics of indeterminate

intentionality, presupposes a hierarchal relationship between the self and the environment – but rather, in a Spinozist fashion, as the increase or decrease in capacities for action, extended to the affective bodies of animals, plants and minerals.⁸ In this sense, affect disrupts any «humanistic», or «paternalistic», ways of engaging with the environment contained in the idea of «caretaking» (Conley, 2016). In material ecocriticism, affect implies not «caring *for* an environment», but rather «a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces» (Bennett, 2010: 111, xiv) – what Anna Tsing (2015) dubs «the arts of noticing», and Karen Barad (2007) and Donna Haraway (2016) «response-ability». These terms make reference to both accountability and the senses, that is, they imply «detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies» (Bennett, 2010: ix).

This commitment to revaluation of the material and the affective is particularly relevant in what has been referred to as «the Anthropocene», the discourses on which are often driven by a binary logic that «separates humanity from the web of life» (Moore, 2017: 595).⁹ As Bennett argues, «such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relationships» (2010: 13). If we respond to the new materialist call «to stretch our modes and sites of awareness, sensitivity, and attachment» to the world (Connolly, 2013: 49), by artistic and other means of expression, then what genres, strategies and poetics can help us in this task? What role can different cultural forms adopt in capturing, mediating and co-creating our ways of living (and dying) in these precarious times?

In this article, I aim to contribute to the discussion on the intersections between affect studies and ecocriticism, especially in its new materialist strands, by focusing on one such cultural form: poetry. As Joanna Mąkowska argues in «Poetic Thinking in the Anthropocene», «poetry matters today, in times of planetary crisis, not because it might serve as an embellishment for theory, but because it offers [...] a complex training in integrative thinking» (2021: 793). That is, poetic thinking, which combines «intellect, embodied intensity, and affectivity», seems well suited «to articulate a dynamically changing relationship between the embodied self and a larger nature-culture continuum» (2021: 793). Drawing on Bennett, I set out to explore the potential of poetry to imagine the worlds beyond the anthropocentric, as well as to engender attentiveness to the nonhuman as proposed in new materialisms. I contend that Bennett's theorization of

eros; it is also the name he gives to the earth's utterly impartial acceptance of each and every one of its elements or inhabitants; it appears also as a biological organ (like lungs or heart); and it even emerges an apersonal physical force (akin to sunlight or gravity). With the last image, Whitman seems keen to locate sympathy within the very infrastructure of the cosmos» (2020: xv). Of particular interest for affect studies and material ecocriticism is Bennett's understanding of sympathy as barometric sensitivity, «a circuit of water, breath, or electricity passing between bodies», which expands the scope of sympathy «beyond the boundaries of the self» (2020: 41-42). This conceptualization is akin to non-representational theories of affective atmospheres proposed by geographers such as Nigel Thrift (2008) or Ben Anderson (2009), as well as Lauren Berlant's (2011) theorization of affect, aesthetics and atmospheres.

⁸ According to Bennett, affect is not limited to human bodies; it is not necessarily transpersonal or intersubjective, but it may be impersonal; that is, it may be inherent to «forms that cannot be imagined [...] as persons» (2010: xii).

⁹ As Jason Moore neatly summarizes this problem: «This makes for a familiar story, one of Humanity doing many terrible things to Nature. It goes something like this. Take one part 'human'. Then one part 'environmental consequences'. Voila! [...] Nature becomes a factor, a variable, a part of the story. This logic runs deep. It is a reflex, a part of our intellectual muscle memory. It shapes our thinking of planetary crisis and its origins, preconceptualizing humanity and nature as separate first, connected second» (2017: 595).

affect, vibrant matter, and her more recent model of «influx-and-efflux» (Bennett, 2020), can be fruitfully thought of in connection to what the writer and scholar Julia Fiedorczuk conceptualizes as ecopoetics. In particular, and addressing Fiedorczuk's ecocriticism and poetic practice, this paper will posit ecopoetics as a means of inducing «an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality» (Bennett, 2010: x), and it will raise questions about «how to bespeak an I alive in a world of vibrant matter» (2020: xii).

My reading is driven by the belief that the aesthetic-affective openness postulated by Bennett requires attention to both affect and form. In my approach, I follow Eugenie Brinkema (2014: xiv), who argues that discussions of affect should not be divorced from those of textuality and representation. She asks: «What [...] would happen to the study of affectivity and form if we were to reintroduce close reading to the study of sensation, not as felt by moved bodies, but as wildly composed in specific cinematic, literary, and critical texts?» (2014: xvi). In line with other «formalist» affect scholars, such as Lauren Berlant (2011) or Sianne Ngai (2005), Brinkema is interested in what texts do at a formal level to compose affects. In building on Brinkema, my work also converses with Nicole Merola's analysis of Juliana Spahr's poetry,¹⁰ whose formal experimentations, according to the scholar, «demand affect studies and reading modes that fasten closer to Brinkema than Massumi but that also, contra Brinkema, position the human reader and body as centrally important to the composition, elicitation, production, and circulation of affect» (2018: 31). Like Merola, I also think that, when reading Fiedorczuk's poetry, it is crucial to «tarry at the juncture of form and affect» (2018: 30), and that reading for affect needs to take into consideration the performative capacities of texts. Yet, for the lack of space, in this paper I will focus mainly on compositional aspects of Fiedorczuk's poetry, while making only brief references to some possible implications for the reader's embodied perception. In what follows, then, I look at Fiedorczuk's ecocritical thought and a selection of her own poems to highlight a number of affinities with Bennett's new materialist work. In doing so, I hope to show how attention to materiality through the affective might enable us to rethink the role of poetry in fostering our attunement to the entanglements of human and more-than-human worlds.

2. ECOPOETICS AS AN AESTHETIC-AFFECTIVE OPENNESS TO VIBRANT MATTER

Julia Fiedorczuk is the prize-winning author of six books of poetry and four of prose.¹¹ As well as being a writer, she is Associate Professor at the University of Warsaw, specializing in 20th-century American poetry and ecocriticism. Her writing, thus, flows between different forms and genres, from literary theory, translation, poetry to philosophy. It can be argued that it is precisely this hovering that enables her to be particularly attentive to the nonhuman world, or in Bennett's words, to «the contributions made by actants whose first language is not human» (2020: xxi).¹²

¹⁰ In particular, Juliana Spahr's *this connection of everyone with lungs: poems*.

¹¹ Fiedorczuk's collections of poetry include: *Listopad nad Narwią* («November at the River Narew», 2000), *Bio* («Bio», 2004), *Planeta rzeczy zagubionych* («A Planet of Lost Things», 2006), *Tlen* («Oxygen», 2009), *tuż-tuż* («almost-there», 2012), and *Psalmy* («Psalms», 2017, for which Fiedorczuk was awarded the prestigious Wisława Szymborska Prize in 2018). Fiedorczuk also published short story collections such as *Poranek Marii* («Maria's Morning», 2010), *Bliskie kraje* («Close countries», 2016), and novels *Biała Ofelia* («White Ophelia», 2011), *Nieważkość* («Weightlessness», 2015, nominated for the Nike Literary Award) and *Pod Słońcem* («Under the Sun», 2020).

¹² In reference to this hybridity in writing, Monika Rudaś-Grodzka (2020) advises against treating Fiedorczuk's scholarly work as mere guidelines to reading her poetry.

While nature has always been one of the most recurrent topics in literature, with innumerable poets across different periods expressing their deep care for the environment, whether plants, animals or landscapes, Fiedorczuk's thought and poetic practice go beyond this thematic comprehension of ecopoetry. In step with new materialisms, she challenges the long-standing dichotomies that still lurk in the discourses on the Anthropocene, such as nature/culture, wilderness/civilization, matter/language, and so on. As Monika Rudaś-Grodzka (2020: 406) observes, the poet also distances herself from the strands in ecofeminism which essentialize women as more closely related to nature, body and reproduction, and instead she feels much more comfortable with the figure of the cyborg – indeed, one of her ecocritical essays is entitled «Cyborg in the garden» («Cyborg w ogrodzie», 2015).¹³ The garden, in spite of its mythological and biblical connotations, does not imply here the return to the lost Eden, but an in-between space, which, «like cyborg, is hybrid – a combination of naturalness and artificiality, bios and techne» (Fiedorczuk, 2015: 187).

One of Fiedorczuk's main concerns is the question of poetics, that is, the way in which the language «is asked to do the ecological work» (Bate in Fiedorczuk and Beltrán, 2020: 217). In her trilingual essay *Ekopoetyka / Eco-poética / Ecopoetics* (2020), written with the Mexican writer and translator Gerardo Beltrán, she conceptualises ecopoetics as «an integrative practice leading to the production of new ways of knowing and living» (2020: 205), which involves co-creating human and nonhuman worlds. Pointing to how the term itself combines two words deriving from Greek – «eco» from *oikos* (household) and «poetics» from *poiēsis* (making) – the authors define ecopoetics «as a practice of responsible homemaking» (276). Such a practice, they continue, implies «a way of engaging with other beings and entities with a *heightened awareness* of material and cosmic dimensions of our being» (218, emphasis mine). Elsewhere they refer to ecopoetics as «a heightened sensitivity» (235) and to poetry as «the means to experience states of *heightened intensity* revealing the interpenetration of all things, material and mental, human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate» (283, emphasis mine). Therefore, in line with new materialist thinkers, what is at stake in ecopoetics is both «the arts of noticing» (Tsing, 2015) and «response-ability» (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016), which rely not only on ethical obligations to respond, but crucially, on the sensual, affective, as well as cognitive dimensions of perception.

It is in this sense that Fiedorczuk's ecopoetics can be articulated through the «aesthetic-affective openness to vital materiality of things» (Bennett, 2010: x), that is, the attunement to a world populated by nonhuman entities, which involves not so much observing them, but recognizing our own embeddedness, vulnerability and interpenetrability. «Making a home» is «a process of learning to live with others, and of coming to terms with the fact that so many various others make up what we think of as 'ourselves'», write Fiedorczuk and Beltrán (2020: 283). As Bennett theorizes in her work on vibrant matter: «a swarm of nonhumans are at work *inside* and *as* us; we are powered by a host of inner aliens, including ingested plants, animals, pharmaceuticals, and the microbiomes upon which thinking itself relies» (2020: xi, emphasis in original). Fiedorczuk's poetry is concerned with such agencies and affectivities that are not specific to human bodies – what Bennett calls in her writing «impersonal affect» or «material vibrancy», building on the Spinozist notion of affect, «which refers broadly to the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness» (2010: xii). That is, as Bennett puts it, «organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects (these distinctions are not particularly salient here) *all* are affective» (2010: xii). Yet, as I will show in the following

¹³ See also Aleksandra Gocławska's (2020) doctoral dissertation on ecofeminist and transnational writing practice of Fiedorczuk and Maria-Mercè Marçal.

pages, Fiedorczuk also poses questions about how these nonhuman agencies affect, or *influence*, the poetic «I». In this sense, I suggest, her poetry can be read through what Bennett calls in her most recent book «influx-and-efflux», a phrase the scholar borrows from Walt Whitman's «Song of Myself» to refer to everyday movements whereby an «I» is «being suffused with apersonal 'affections'», which then exit, having been transformed into something new (2020: 64). In contrast to her earlier work on vibrant matter – in which Bennett highlighted material agencies of the «non-or-not-quite-human», arguing that the «habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)» (2010: ix) had the effect of downplaying the power of things – here she returns to the question of human agency to think about living well in a world of lively materialities (2020: xviii).

If the ecopoetic endeavour consists of heightening our aesthetic-affective attunement to the world and our own posthuman becomings, then the question is: what are the features of a poetics suited for this task? Or, in Bennett's words: «How to write in an eco-philosophical or eco-poetic voice, or hum, which finds, invents, inflects, and arranges words and their images such that they salute the swarm of apersonal, nonhuman agencies amongst and inside us?»¹⁴ «What grammar, syntax, tropes, and tricks are most pertinent to a linguistic and ethical inflection of a process that includes a human, alinguistic influences?» «Such a poetics», she writes, «would try to give these forces their due while placing them in a wordy, normative milieu that is not really their home» (2020: xx–xxi). In what follows, I look at a selection of poems written by Fiedorczuk at different moments in her career to show how in her poetic practice of «responsible home-making» she fosters a non-anthropocentric model of self, while making room to accommodate a variety of «vibrant materials, whose first language is not words» (2020: xxiv).

Fiedorczuk's poetry is driven by a de-anthropocentric impulse, as seen in her consistent focus on a variety of nonhuman lives – whether such nonhuman lives are understood as «Compost», «Electricity», «Noise», «Evening» or «Weather».¹⁵ In consonance with contemporary ecological thought, she often relies on a scale-switching grammar,¹⁶ as she moves on macro- and micro-scales, fluctuating between the earth, seas and air, between the deep time of evolution and that of the intimate and personal, between the galactic and the intercellular space. The writer is attentive to the vibrant matter of things often recurring to the language of physics, biology, chemistry and astronomy. As Bill Johnston notes in the introduction to *Oxygen*, «weaving through the whole are the processes of the physical formation of the earth and, especially, the evolutionary emergence of life and biological speciation. Waking and the springing of life from nests, cocoons, buds, or simply photosynthesis, is ever-present in these poems» (in Fiedorczuk, 2017: xvii–xviii). In line with the new materialist project, Fiedorczuk «bear[s] witness to the vital materialities that flow through and around us», zooming in on a variety of «ontologically diverse actants» (Bennett, 2010: x, xiv): «interstellar dust on the young leaves of first trees» («Orion's Shoulder»),¹⁷ small creatures like «hedgehogs sleeping near the pulse of earth» («Sorella la luna»),¹⁸ insects with «tiny heart» («Beetle»),¹⁹

¹⁴ See «Wild Things: A Conversation with Jack Halberstam and Jane Bennett», <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqCKED7ihUQ>.

¹⁵ Unless stated otherwise, all poems quoted in this article come from the bilingual collection *Oxygen* (2017), with a selection of poems from Fiedorczuk's earlier poetry books and translated from the Polish by Bill Johnston.

¹⁶ Matters of scale and perspective are highly relevant in theorizations on the Anthropocene (see Alaimo 2016 and Oppermann 2018).

¹⁷ Fiedorczuk (2017: 5).

¹⁸ Fiedorczuk (2017: 29).

¹⁹ Fiedorczuk (2017: 13).

compost microscopic organisms («Compost»)²⁰ and haemoglobin that distributes oxygen in our blood («Pewnego dnia»)²¹. Yet, while Fiedorczuk is attentive to the nonhuman agencies and processes, she is also «a poet of the human» (Johnston in Fiedorczuk, 2017: xvii). As Johnston posits: «however profoundly she immersed herself in the *longue durée* of geological and astronomical time (‘the deep time of earth’, as she expresses in the poem ‘Lands and Oceans’), the I is rarely absent for long» (xx–xxi). «Bio», which opens with the line «When I was a fish» (Fiedorczuk, 2017: 23), brings together personal and evolutionary time. In «Beetle», the poet adopts the insect’s perspective («My chin runs with juice», «So much life / It seethes in my tiny heart, almost bursts / my suit of chitin, my gown of flesh»), but it seems to coalesce with that of her own: «Today I have such hunger, such desire / That the day must turn into an endless stream / Of richest yellow, that luscious fruit, the world» (2017: 13).

In reference to this poem, Mąkowska argues that «instead of overconfidently assuming a nonhuman perspective, Fiedorczuk explores how human and more-than-human embodied (and erotic) experience might intersect» (2021: 795–796). Central to Fiedorczuk’s ecopoetic practice is not a definite overturning of the subject, but rather thinking «through the entanglements of the female subject’s lived experience and the life of non-human others» (795). Indeed, according to Mąkowska, Fiedorczuk repeatedly thematizes «a shared, inter-species, affective intensity» (796), or, one might add, kinship, following Donna Haraway’s (2016) extension of kinship beyond patriarchal normativity, blood ties and frontiers of humanity. As Haraway puts it, «all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense» (2016: 103). Like Haraway, Fiedorczuk extends attentiveness and kinship to all «critters», to use Haraway’s generative term that encompasses multiple forms of existence: human and nonhuman animals, microbes, plants and objects (2016: 169).

This does not mean that such relationships with nonhuman critters are inherently harmonious or congenial; as Haraway writes, they can be «full of waste, cruelty, indifference, ignorance and loss» (2003: 12).²² In her ecocritical thinking, Fiedorczuk also underlines that «being embedded in an environment, one of many elements of a biota, does not always have to be a source of joy. After all, it implicates mortality and decay» (Fiedorczuk and Beltrán, 2020: 207). The poet often recurs to the trope of decay and decomposition in her writing, as for example in this poem entitled «Compost»:

These tiny little things eating bodies of leaves on the forest floor.
I rub between my fingers a cold lump of soil,
the dirt fills the contours of the exotic map.

In my arteries, a concert of unknown music,
the hum of blood and life, which hosts me briefly as a river
hosts an unexpected leaf:
a rough voyage down the sheer waterfalls with a view of sky.

I’m lying on the moss.
The lead of clouds veined by the branches,
white sun, wind and the flutter of wings,
meaningless, eyes, claws and feathers,

a meaningless spark between the darkness.
One breath in, one breath out. In and out, beyond me,

²⁰ Translated from the Polish by Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese (Fiedorczuk and Wójcik-Leese, 2012: 74).

²¹ «Pewnego dnia», originally published in *Tlen* (2009), not included in *Oxygen*.

²² Queer ecology (Morton, 2009 and 2010) also reminds us that bodies and environments are often interrelated in toxic kinship, pointing to the diverse «uninvited» kinships like viruses, parasites, and so on.

because I'm a fold in the vast cloth of time,
I live in exile,
a ripple on the surface of water dark as silence.

A leaf falls into a river, the river into the sea.
Sea blooms with the crimson of anemone.
Over this gorgeous meadow, under the vault of the surf,
unhurried indifferent fish.

(Fiedorczuk and Wójcik-Leese, 2012: 74)

Compost, formed from food waste and other decayed remains of organic matter that might include leaves, worms, bacteria and other germs, is used to fertilize the soil in gardens, landscaping and farming. Fiedorczuk aestheticizes and brings tenderness to this seemingly unpoetic matter: the microcritters are referred to as «tiny little things eating bodies of leaves», and everything seems to «hum» with life. Anna Węgrzyniak, who reads the poem in the context of Fiedorczuk's entire oeuvre, considers it representative of her «ecopoetic inhabiting of *oikos*» (2016: 52). Spatial metaphors evoking «home» («the forest floor» and «under the vault of the surf») are central to Fiedorczuk's ecopoetics. Worms live in the forest, fish in the river and the sea, and the lyrical subject, while making attempts to interrelate with the earth's intimate, nonhuman, «indifferent» others, remains somewhat distant, «liv[ing] in exile» – an expression which emphasises the simultaneous proximity and strangeness of this «home» (Węgrzyniak, 2016: 61). In her «elegiac meditation» (2016: 65), Fiedorczuk is trying to get closer to the earth, evoking the pastoral trope of lying on the moss and looking up at the sky, but she feels like «a meaningless spark between the darkness». Life «hosts» her «briefly», just like «a river hosts an unexpected leaf».

Interestingly, then, the poem does not proffer a complete dissolution of the human in the environment. However, although the lyrical I might feel «in exile», it nevertheless maintains an acute sense of its own embeddedness in what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1969) famously called «the flesh of the world». The poem, I suggest, displays Fiedorczuk's impulse to register the liveliness of matter through the affective, which is articulated by drawing a connection between sound and breathing:

In my arteries, concert of unknown music,
the hum of blood and life [...]
One breath in, one breath out. In and out, beyond me

(Fiedorczuk and Wójcik-Leese, 2012: 74)

The motif of breathing is one of the most recurrent in Fiedorczuk's work. In «Oxygen», the poem that gives the title to Fiedorczuk's fourth collection of poems, published in 2009, she writes: «I came here in order to breathe» and «we dwell lightly at the outbreath of the world» (2017: 27). Notably, she remakes the familiar Cartesian formula, *cogito ergo sum*, concluding «I breathe, I breathe therefore I am» (2017: 27). According to Węgrzyniak, this anti-Cartesian declaration «exposes the biochemical, material and energetic aspect of being» (2016: 66), reminding us of the banal truth: the interdependence of life and breathing. Undoubtedly, what binds us to other beings is the process of respiration.²³ Through this rewriting, Fiedorczuk also challenges the notion of subjectivity that is at the base of Cartesian rationalism in favour of the Spinozist (and Bennettian) vitality of matter, often expressed in poetic *and* scientific language. In her poetry Fiedorczuk explores different types of breathing – gill and pulmonary breathing,

²³ In the context of the Anthropocene, it can also make reference to the quality of air we breathe.

intracellular breathing or the breathing of earth and cosmos – repeatedly evoking biochemical processes. In «Orion’s Shoulder» she rescales from «the interstellar dust» and a hare that «brushes the salty dew / and presses on the warm earth, intent on its frothing pulse» to «assimilation and dissimulation. CO₂, H₂O, / and light, light, light, / metabolic conversion, growth and maturation / within the flat disk of the rippling Galaxy» (2017: 5). The poem seems to address one of Fiedorczuk’s favourite topics, photosynthesis, in which plants, algae and cyanobacteria convert light energy into chemical energy that is released through cellular respiration. The release of oxygen as a waste product into the atmosphere supplies most of the energy necessary for life on earth. In the process of metabolism, the living organisms assimilate food to obtain energy; dissimulation consists in the decomposition of organic compounds and conversion of complex proteins, fats and carbohydrates into simple substances. The poet aestheticizes metabolism, the transformation of energy and matter, possibly pointing to the constant decomposition and recomposition of the self.

By contrast, in «Photosynthesis», the poem that opens *Bio*, only the first line seems to evoke the titular process, and the poem then slides into the hi(stories)²⁴ of the origin of the universe and the evolution of species (thus perhaps once again linking different types of breathing):

The sun gives birth to me almost without pain,
a dressing of warmth on my foot, on my eyelids
a light compress of blood, unearthly goggles.
On them crouches a spectrum like a rapid

giddy anemone that tells me
colorful ichthyological stories. Red
and black is how everything starts,
then later the Great Inundation

of Ultramarine, my amphibious vehicle.
How was it? I strive to remember,
rubbing my eyes. Those subcutaneous
times drift nearer, they are mine

for a light-flash, a brief apnea
and an exquisite fear, that instantly dissolves
in the foaming depths. To possess you,
world. To love you, lose you.

But what’s needed is to emerge on land, grow feathers,
look straight at the sun.
The sealike green of the iris.
Flesh, cloth, breath.

(Fiedorczuk, 2017: 11)

Interestingly, Fiedorczuk begins at the level of the individual («the sun gives birth to *me* almost without pain») to end up at the impersonal («but *what’s needed* is to emerge on land, grow feathers, / look straight at the sun»), which exemplifies one of the most prominent aspects of her poetry: her dexterous intertwining of different scales and

²⁴ As Iovino and Oppermann argue, «the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be ‘read’ and interpreted as forming narratives, stories» (2014: 1). Stories are central to new materialist thinking, since they can function as «amplifiers» and «sensitizers» (Neimanis 2017: 59) that increase our attunement towards the world and our posthuman natures.

perspectives, which complicates the very idea where (and when) the «I» starts and ends. What is unavoidably lost in the translation of this poem to English is the rich consonance in the final line: «tkanka, tkanina, tlen» («flesh, cloth, breath»). The use of alliteration and assonance (tk, tk, t; an, an, na, en) stimulates our ears and imagination (Węgrzyniak, 2016: 58). The explosive «tk» and expansive «an» in «tkanka» stretches into «tkanina», which is then transformed into the less explosive «tlen», thus creating the breath-sound effect. As Elisa González also notices in her review of *Oxygen*, «the line can't help expanding, like the lungs when inhaling [...] The poem is over, the breath released».²⁵ «Photosynthesis», then, not only registers, but also produces a form of breathing in the reader, and in doing so it captures, and potentially amplifies, the sense of our connectedness with the world. This operation also uncovers the underlying connections between the three concepts: flesh (or tissue), cloth (or textile) and breath (in the original, oxygen). It links human and nonhuman forms of *poiēsis*, cutting across the culture/nature, or meaning/matter, divide.²⁶ Indeed, as Fiedorczuk and Beltrán remind us, «*poiēsis* refers to the formation and transformation of the world, through language or otherwise. The suffix *-poiēsis* appears also in words related to generation or self-generation of living organisms and other systems» (2020: 277). Such interrelatedness of the human and nonhuman transformation of the matter is also conveyed in «Compost», a word which shares common etymology with «composition», coming from the Latin term *componere* (*cum* + *ponere*, that is, «put together»).

Just like in «Compost» («One breath in, one breath out. In and out, beyond me»), in «Photosynthesis» breathing is what interrelates the poetic self with the «tissue» of the world; the poetic self, in turn, «writes up» (Bennett, 2020) influences that pervade and disrupt it. This is precisely the meaning of the more-than-human process of influx-and-efflux in Bennett's work: «I alters and is altered» (2020: xiii), or, in Spinozist language, I affects and is affected with every breath. The self that Bennett conceptualizes through Whitman is constantly regulated/dysregulated by flows, currents, moods, etc. Indeed, the passage in which Whitman introduces «the aquatic self» features a sea breathing itself in and out:

Sea of stretch'd groundswells,
Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths,
Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell'd yet always-ready graves,
Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty sea,
I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases.
Partaker of influx and efflux I [...]

(in Bennett, 2020: x)

Bennett describes the process of influx-and-efflux as «that ubiquitous tendency for outsides to come in, muddy the waters, and exit to partake in new (lively/deathly) waves of encounter» (2020: x). In Fiedorczuk, the waves of encounter encompass the «subcutaneous times» of evolution:

Those subcutaneous
times drift nearer, they are mine

²⁵ See <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/julia-fiedorczuk-oxygen-selected-poems/>.

²⁶ As Węgrzyniak (2016: 58) observes, «tkanina» (cloth/textile) makes reference to both the cloth of the world made of biological tissues and the cultural cloth, in which different discourses (poetic, scientific) are interwoven. This example shows how Fiedorczuk's poetry explores the «materiality [of language] (sounds, rhythms, the look of words on the page), its plasticity and wildness, as well as its capacity to represent complex thought» (Fiedorczuk and Beltrán, 2020: 283). In Fiedorczuk's work, as Brenda Hillman notes, «human and non-human entities converse [...] as do phonemes and other particles» (in Fiedorczuk, 2017: xv).

for a light-flash, a brief apnea
and an exquisite fear, that instantly dissolves
in the foaming depths.

(Fiedorczuk, 2017: 11)

In «a brief apnea / and an exquisite fear» one can read the interval, the «and» of «influx-and-efflux», which Bennett understands as «the *hover-time* of transformation, during which the otherwise that entered makes a difference and is made different». Significantly, it also marks «a delay» before our «vibratory *encounter*» can become translated and «written up» as a «(human) *experience*» (Bennett, 2020: x, emphasis in original).

Fiedorczuk, like Whitman, offers a porous model of I, which – far from the impenetrable individual that is firmly rooted in a world – is floaty, airy and vital. Such fluidity also characterizes her writing, as it continuously blends the spaces of matter and culture. Her poems are suffused with metaphors of dissolving, thickening, (over)growing, (e)merging, nesting, filling in, melting away, dripping. All these words point to the processual, fluid, dynamic world that undergoes constant changes. However, while Fiedorczuk's poems seem to sometimes blur the lines between different critters, she does not cancel the singularity of their beings: we are far from the complete dissolution in nature.²⁷ Instead, similarly to Bennett, the poet is interested in transformation which occurs through the constant recomposition of self, which is

traversed by ambient sounds, smells, textures, words, ideas, and erotic and other currents, all of which comingle with previously internalized immigrants and become «touched» by them, until some of the incorporated and no-longer-quite-alien materials are «breathed» out as positions, dispositions, claims, and verse.

(Bennett, 2020: xiii)

As already mentioned, in Fiedorczuk's poetry this «breathing out» is closely interrelated with sound. «In my arteries, a concert of unknown music, / the hum of blood and life», we read in «Compost». She frequently associates the rhythm of breathing with that of cosmos and blood. The sense of hearing is crucial to Fiedorczuk's comprehension of ecopoetics, as it allows her to challenge «the scopocentrism of modern culture» (Fiedorczuk and Beltrán, 2020: 206). As Fiedorczuk and Beltrán argue, «ecologically oriented poetry is not necessarily a celebration – either of nonhuman nature, or of human dependence on it. Rather, it is a practice of listening» (2020: 207). Recalling Forrest Gander's declaration in *As a Friend* («I don't think poets tell things at all [...] poetry listens»), they set out to think about poetry's alertness and responsiveness to more-than-human worlds (2020: 206). Drawing upon Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, Fiedorczuk often adopts the metaphor of the Aeolian harp, comparing the universe to «a gigantic organs»²⁸ (here the word «organs» may well refer to a musical instrument that produces sound by driving wind through the pipes, but it also brings to mind biological organs, a collection of tissues in living organisms). The harp's music, write Fiedorczuk and Beltrán, «is an effect of a collaboration between a man-made object and the wind» (2020: 230), as the instrument reacts to an impulse (or, after Bennett, *influence*) coming from the outside, whether human (creativity) or nonhuman (air). It stands for «the continuity of life within and outside the human being» (230), as well as,

²⁷ The formula here, writes Bennett, quoting Deleuze, is «ontologically one, formally diverse» (2010: xi).

²⁸ In the poem «Kolejny przełom w historii ludzkości», included in *Tlen* (2009).

one might add, the ecological call for an attunement that would transcend anthropocentrism.²⁹

Fiedorczuk's most recent book of poetry, *Psalms*, responds to her earlier postulation that sound's physical materiality can attune us to the world through affective resonance. The word «psalms» (from the Greek *psalmoi*) originally referred to songs sung to harp music, and its root, *psallein*, means «to play upon a stringed instrument». As the poet explained during one of her poetry readings, two affective registers predominate in her latest work: an unconditional celebration of life, and despair as a consequence of the planetary crisis.³⁰ She noted that she draws on the biblical psalms mostly for their sound, but she understands the form in a completely secular way: water, gravity, the chemical cycles, the light from the sun, etc. are both sustaining and potentially destructive for life. This is consistent with her earlier work, in which echoes to decay and destruction are recurrent, as in «Relentlessly Craving»:

poem, poem be in the sun
in the eye of the world
in the turning of bread into motion
in the constant decay that is the condition of all synthesis
in the blood
[...]

there is a time for hope
and a time for despair

(Fiedorczuk, 2017: 67–69)

Ecological crisis and, at times, the imagery of the «end of the world» echo across Fiedorczuk's poems that precede her psalms. In «Drawer», which starts with «Some collect shavings of the past», she writes about how beneath «piles of illustrated magazines containing all the beauty in the world», «someone will one day discover a map of an obsolete world— / a landscape of defunct countries». The furniture also holds «herds of long-dead animals feeding on an extinct species of grass. // Houses eroded by water and by wind, and in the houses / faded photographs of those who once lived there» (2017: 53).

Her psalms return to this sense of mourning, but the impending catastrophe is even more palpable. The poet interrogates what Merola (2018) refers to as «the Anthropocene anxiety». In «Psalm XXXI» it materializes through a hesitant quotation from the Polish national anthem: «Poland / that had perished, and then had not perished, and then / again had perished, and then not [...] all at once / the chickadee was absorbed by sky before I could say / remember, remember me—» (Fiedorczuk, 2017: 107). Like this poem, many of Fiedorczuk's psalms end in a dash.³¹ Such elliptical endings can point to their sense of brokenness, interruption, or their resistance to closure. Fiedorczuk stated that they also

²⁹ The concept of attunement is of course central to both new materialisms and affect theory (see, for instance, *Peculiar attunements. How affect theory turned musical*, by Roger Mathew Grant, Fordham University Press, 2020).

³⁰ The event was supported by *Poetry without Borders*, part of the Literature for Inclusion initiative led by Gulabuddin Sukhanwar in collaboration with Hanna Musiol, Associate Professor of English at NTNU, and NTNU's research project TransLit: Sustainable Ethics, Affects, and Pedagogies led by Libe García Zarranz, Associate Professor of Literature in English. It was celebrated via Zoom on May 13, 2021. See: <https://litteraturhusetitrondeim.no/arrangement/poetry-without-borders-a-poetry-reading-by-julia-fiedorczuk/>

³¹ In *Psalms V*, she concludes: «I seek and find, seek / and do not find, seek and disappear and—» (Fiedorczuk, 2017: 101).

permit «opening the body of the poem to whatever is out there»,³² thus emphasizing the poem's permeability, mucousity and, indeed, continuity with the world. At the time when ecological crisis is acute, Fiedorczuk's psalms posit something radical: not so much «care for the environment» (Bennett, 2010: 111) in a traditional environmentalist sense, but drawing on Verena Conley «the care of the possible», namely, a way of being attentive to «what can be prevented and, in the same gesture, to what can be invented» (2016: 352).³³

In one of her earlier poems, «The Way Out», Fiedorczuk seems to gesture to what is really at stake in «the aesthetic-affective openness» to vital materiality and in the «influx-and-efflux» model of subjectivity:

We the infected must constantly resume the challenge.
 Otherwise we will disappear.
 Be swallowed by the black night of hedgehogs and ants.
 Be overgrown by mold.
 Soak into the earth.

We the infected must constantly resume the challenge.
 Admit into ourselves the killing sea.

(Fiedorczuk, 2017: 81)

But, what kinds of «I» and «we» can live well on «a damaged planet» (Bennett, 2020; Tsing et al., 2017)? Fiedorczuk's poetry rarely provides answers. Not incidentally, the poem ends with the following line: «And look, there is no map» (2017: 83).

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Poetry, «as an anthropomorphic form of participation in the coemergence of human and non-human worlds, [...] is specifically human», write Fiedorczuk and Beltrán (2020: 283). Poetry may be anthropomorphic, but this does not necessarily make it anthropocentric. It might seem contradictory that it is a human subject who, after all, is affording voice to vibrant materiality of things whose first language is not human. But, in fact, such a contradiction «may well dissipate if one considers revisions in operative notions of matter, life, self, self-interest, will and agency» (Bennett, 2010: ix).

Through a selection of Fiedorczuk's poems, and thinking with Bennett, I have posed questions about an (eco)poetics that would be capacious enough to accommodate a world of «influxes and effluxes», and about a model of subjectivity that would be «consonant» with the vital materiality of things (Bennett, 2020: xv). As I have tried to demonstrate, while Fiedorczuk returns to «the question of I», which is often experienced as local, intimate, personal, she constantly traces the «cosmic» and «evolutionary» dimensions of this self. In this regard, I have argued that her poetry, as a manifestation of ecopoetics, can be defined as «an aesthetic-affective openness» to the more-than-human world. I have explored diverse aesthetic strategies in Fiedorczuk's work: the scale-

³² During the poetry reading mentioned above, organized by the NTNU.

³³ As Conley notes, care encompasses the multiplicity of meanings, ranging from anxiety or fear to «solicitude – a caring for the earth and other human beings» (2016: 342). However, building on several new materialist and affect theorists, Conley links «the care of the possible» with affect, sensation, matter, attentiveness, and event (2016: 341).

shifting grammar, which puts together radically different spatial, temporal, and biocultural scales; the combination of poetic and scientific vocabulary; process-oriented metaphors that give life to a process-oriented self; the formal openness of her poems; as well as recurring tropes (compost, breathing and music) that are mobilized in her «writing up» (Bennett, 2020) of human and nonhuman processual agencies. This is not to suggest a mere correlation between eco-poetics and a single set of aesthetic strategies. Rather than proposing a list of eco-tropes, I believe it is necessary to address each poetic oeuvre according to its own particularities and from there raise questions about how poetry can become an affective means to engender our attunement with the world.

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