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# Book Review: *Poetics for the More-Than-Human World: An Anthology of Poetry and Commentary*

by Camilla Nelson



## About the Author

Camilla Nelson is a British language artist, small press publisher, creative programmer, and freelance academic. She has a PhD in Performance Writing from Falmouth University/Dartington College of Arts (2012). She is a member of the PLACE Collective, which sits within UK's Centre for National Parks and Protected Areas (CNPPA), on the Ambleside campus of Cumbria University. Her work explores the materiality of language in page-based poetry, soundwork, installation and performance particularly in relation to the nonhuman world ([www.camillanelson.co.uk](http://www.camillanelson.co.uk)).

## Book Review

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Mary Newell, Bernard Quetchenbach, and Sarah Nolan, eds. 2021. *Poetics for the More-Than-Human World: An Anthology of Poetry and Commentary*. New York: Spuyten Duyvil.

At just over five hundred pages, *Poetics for the More-Than-Human World: An Anthology of Poetry and Commentary* (Newell, Quetchenbach, and Nolan 2021) has a formidable physique but a friendly feel. I had already gleaned a sense of the scope and sentiment of the anthology from the online launch readings before receiving it in physical form. This sense was re-affirmed by the editors' introduction: although the voices assembled in this anthology cannot "claim to speak for all humanity, this collection features a diverse slate of poets practicing a variety of twenty-first century approaches:" "beat-inspired rebelliousness, deep image-inflected perceptual psychology, projectionist field composition, and l=a=n-g=u=a=g=e dynamics, culminating in Hinge and other genres of innovative avant-garde work . . ." (i). This is a collection that prioritizes "writing that aspires to ecocentric inclusiveness" (ii). The effort towards inclusiveness is explicitly applied to the geography, gender, and ethnicity of its contributors, as much as it is to the more-than-human world that influences the humans who made the collection. For what book could aspire to inclusion beyond the human if it did not make the same efforts between humans themselves?

*Poetics for the More-Than-Human World* has been assembled by a trio of US editors—Mary Newell, Bernard Quetchenbach, and Sarah Nolan—who have unsurprisingly chosen a majority of US or US-based authors to include within its pages. The British authors are the most frequently represented after these, followed by writers from Canada, Australia, Aotearoa-New Zealand, a good spread of European entries (Romania, Portugal, The Netherlands, and France), a significant number from South Korea, and less numerous entries from Mexico, India, Kuwait, Israel, The Philippines, Guam, and Beijing.

Not all authors identify their place of writing or origin, but the biographies that do ground this text in a series of specific locations and with those the emergent narrative of ecopoetics. Despite the editors' intentions, this is a poetics still strongly defined by writing from the Western world, even as it makes headway towards expansion within and beyond these territories. Tacey M. Atsitty, is Diné, specifically Tsénahabíinii (Sleep Rock People) and born for Ta'neezahnii (Tangle People)—these being her mother's and father's ancestral Navajo clans, respectively. Joseph Bruchac is an enrolled citizen of the Nulhegan Band of the Abenaki Nation. The aboriginal name is given alongside the colonized name of many Aotearoa-New Zealand poets. Attention paid to the voices of indigenous peoples and languages is notable. Moving beyond the geographical frame, Julian (néé Sara) Mithra is the only author to declare their gender identity clearly in their biography. Elsewhere, they have described their writing as hovering “between genre and gender, border mongering and mongreling” (Mithra, n.d.). It is this spirit of hybridity, of being aware of borders, of exploring the space beyond and between formal boundaries—however these are defined—that infuses the pages of this book.

Any project that hopes to explore human and more-than-human relationships in words has to find a way of languaging that exceeds the traditional semiosis of printed letters on a page. More-than-human voices emerge “from the same reality that we ourselves belong to, from neighbors and relative sharing DNA, chemical composition, and mutual embeddedness in a cosmic history” (Newell, Quetchenbach, and Nolan 2021, i). We are many species living and working alongside, within, among, and sometimes despite each other's myriad modes of communication. What ways of working with words can we humans find to express the continuity, kinship, and alterity between our different ways of life? As a creative and a critic, my way has been to explore the similarity and difference in the sound of our speech, the look of the lines and marks that we make, how our bodies and words move. This is the first major anthology I have seen publish a really robust range of linguistic ecopoetic experiments that expand human semiosis beyond human words into the more-than-human, not only as an exercise of “humility, recognition and kinship” (i) with other species, but as an expression of kinship with a more-than-human range of significance and signification. Weighing in at just over five hundred pages, any attempt to offer a conclusive opinion on this work would be futile. My instinct below has been instead to hash out an improvisatory route through the various treatments of lines on the page, which foster connection while delimiting boundaries, so that other readers might follow.

Juana Adcock's “Steller's Use of Verbs When Describing the Sea Cow, Hunted to Extinction within 27 Years of Its Discovery by Europeans. De bestiis marines, 1751” (2–3) opens the anthology with a use of a line—here the forward slash (/)—to denote

absence. Adcock's use of “ / ” marks the omission of the many other human words that have been deleted in order for the attitudes of the writing humans towards their hunted animals to come to the fore with a searing and heartbreaking clarity: “captured / resisting / put to uses / detached” (2). This mark of omission does unto human language what human culture has done to the population of sea cows; the words have been slashed. The object of these actions has been extinguished. Nowhere in the body of the poem is the sea cow directly mentioned. These “ / ” beat a pathway of extinction through the text. Wreaking, through the marked erasure of words, the fate of the sea cow population upon a human text.

Sam Sampson pushes the use of lines to mark absence still further. In “Kia Toitu He Kauri” (318–21) the extended line is an axis that constructs the poem on a horizontal and vertical scaffold through which to explore the divergent significance of lines as lettered, marked, and spatial signifiers. Sampson gives a thorough gloss on how his poetic use of lines develops from Colin McCahon's study of the Kauri, trees considered to be “taonga (treasures) of the Māori ancestral spirit world” (322), but the multiply signifying crosses in this text are striking irrespective of this background. Two crossed lines—“X”—mark the spot spatially or geographically on a map where something has or might be about to happen. The map here is the page, marked by two further crossed lines, the vertical and horizontal axis (X and Y). Sampson is plotting an imagined geography that signifies in multiple directions. These lines symbolize the lost branches that crisscrossed the sky, playing with the flow of light. “X” is a signature of that or those that cannot read or write. How do trees read and write? How do we read or write trees? As bleached pages marked with our ink-made lines? Branches abstracted into horizontally-inked axes? Eroded or abstracted crossbones? These X's are “death markings” (322) on multiple levels. The bones of the Māori who treasured them. The marks on the tree. The mark on the page that once was tree. The tree that has become a page because it was marked. The tree that has become page in order to be marked. Human marks give heightened significance. They make things stand out, or as Sampson speaking by way of Jean-Michel Basquiat puts it: “I cross out words so you will see them more” (322). This heightened sensitivity to the symbolism of lines and their relationship to the absence of trees marks a place of mourning for these trees.

James McCorkle's “Locations/Echolocation” (241–46) is emblematic in another way of this collection's hybrid linear significance. McCorkle's six-page work meanders between poetry, prose, and photography, meditating on the theme of lines that connect and divide. “A line moving across the deserts” is not just (or even) a boundary fence but:

an open flow, flowing (a river, life-water to  
orchards, the flowerings            the vast, the numerous)            (246)

The lines that mark intervals between sections of text are the photographed sections of a boundary fence. The crisscrossed metal wire lines of the fence combine to divide the land, and with it the people. The photographic lines of the fence section off areas of text from one another and in so doing demonstrate the effect a fence has in redefining the relationship between the elements on both sides. It is not that these areas of text cease to signify in relation to each other now that they are fenced off, but rather that this fence is now part of their meaning too. The fence acts as a bridge even as it seeks to divide. The lines of the fence and the photograph, the horizontal rows of curling letter lines, testify to the versatile kinship of lines that do exactly what the editors hope it might, fostering connections not just across but through and because of “delimiting boundaries” (iii).

John Charles Ryan explores this broken continuity between forms of lines in “excubitorium: place of vigil” (312–14) in a poignant dialogue between written word and what appears to be an electrocardiograph, but I suspect is more likely to be a seismograph, and is easy at first glance to mistake for a line break. The earth’s life is monitored by the progress of a single line. Are these human words issued from a bedside or a sentry box? Are we keeping watch, protecting, or waiting for change? The wriggling scribble suggests that the writer is more a vigilant watchman than a potential mourner for the pulse continues to lurch despite sustained lengths of stillness, though both roles are implied. Again, the question of who or what is writing, or what is reading this line, and how, are invoked.

This insistent reminder of the plurality of modes of signification that is raised in many different ways, without being resolved, is what I admire most about the anthology. The multiple explorations of a line as a scything, punctuated absence in Adcock’s poem (2–3); as McCorkle’s lines that form a delimiting fence to bridge and break “an open flow, flowing” (246) only to recombine in “a river, life-water” (246) of text; lines that signify the denuded branches of trees—a hanging tree, a crucifix—all crucial axes within which Sampson plots his poem (318–21); a signature of life beyond the human, signing its continued pulse in a language we might try to understand, as in Ryan’s “excubitorium: place of vigil” (312–14). The anthology continually points beyond the habitual, normalized literary use of lines as a series of printed words in such a way that word forms are forced to realize their place as one of many modes of signification. Just as we humans must learn our place as one of myriad life forms living and expressing ourselves on this vast and proliferating planet, so our letters must learn their place as one of many ways to mean in the making of a poem.

In any significant overview or gathering together of work, such as this is, there is a canonization at work. Anthologies are a moment of temperature-taking. Where are we as writers and thinkers in ecopoetics right now? How does our dedication to place play out in our politics of publishing? A selection has been made, and with it a narrative formed, about who and what should appear, be made present, and signify in this evolving field of more-than-human poetry. Ten years ago, you would have been hard-pressed to find this level of formally experimental ecopoetic material all in one place. The biographies would have been more narrowly defined and maybe the geographies too. The concerted hybridity that invites the realms of the photo essay into the interview and the interview into a critical reflection, as in Jonathan Skinner's "Ten Questions on *Birds of Tift*." (464–74); the collaborative ways of working between and across disciplines—geographically and temporally, investigating past and present across space and time of Frost, Hogue, and Kornberg's "A Dickinson Bestiary (A Chorograph)" (122–37) further demonstrate the spirit of inclusion and acceptance in which this anthology is forged. This acknowledgement of formal boundary as something to be opened up, investigated, and explored is full of hope. I think we are making progress.

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