

Reviews

Aaron Moe

The Poetics of Making Kin

David Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics. Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 184 pp. \$92.00 (hb); 23.00 (pb).



For behind a formulating question about the limits of a category under discussion is hidden a question that bursts all formulas asunder. -- Martin Buber

Many poets and thinkers of the past have grappled with the tension between the lyric “now” and Deep Time: Thoreau speaks of “toe[ing] that line” between “the meeting of two eternities, the past and future” (14); Dickinson points us toward how “Forever — is

composed of Nows" (*Poems* 690); Whitman suggests a poem and a blade of grass are both the "journey-work of the stars" (217) — these well-known phrases are but a few that demonstrate the ongoing tensions within the literary tradition between Deep Time and the "now" of a poem.

And yet, David Farrier's *Anthropocene Poetics*, to echo Martin Buber, bursts these categories asunder. Part of Farrier's work began in his co-authored introduction to the cluster on Deep Time published in the *Environmental Humanities*. The authors outline three "modes" of response to Deep Time in the context of the Anthropocene: the mode of enchantment, the mode of violence, and the mode of haunting (Ginn et al., 218 ff). In *Anthropocene Poetics*, Farrier teases out the nuances within these modes further to encapsulate dread, remorse, resolve, humility, and more, giving the reader the sense that *Anthropocene Poetics* "bursts asunder" these categories. Amidst the intimacy and remorse, grief and yet resolve, Farrier offers vertiginous insights as to the ways a poem invites us to pause in a "now" infused and haunted by Deep Past and Futures.

On the back cover, Catherine Rigby praises *Anthropocene Poetics* claiming it is "not just a work about poetry; it is an exquisitely poetic work of scholarship." Like a poem, Farrier creates an exquisite form within which ideas grow, point, echo, and develop to where the linear progression blossoms into a nonlinear realm of thought. To anchor the form, Farrier works in couplets and trios: the three exquisite chapters ("Intimacy: The Poetics of Think Time"; "Entangled: The Poetics of Sacrifice Zones"; "Swerve: The Poetics of Kin-Making") each focus on a pair of poets (Elizabeth Bishop and Seamus Heaney; Peter Larkin and Evelyn Reilly; Mark Doty and Christain Bök). Just as the balanced titles suggest, the ideas echo across *intimacy*, *entangled*, and *swerve* so that the poetics of *sacrifice-zones* always already contains *intimacy* and *kin-making*.

To put it another way, just as Farrier explores how Deep Past and Deep Future compress themselves into the vastness of the poetic now, the "now" of one of his sentences contains all the future phrases of the book's grammatical time as well as the deep past leading up to that moment. Take Farrier's exploration of Doty's poems on jellyfish. After contextualizing jellyfish in the deepness of evolutionary time as well as their current blooms in the sacrifice zones of warming, plastic-ridden oceans (which points toward their trajectories far into the deep future), Farrier grapples with how Doty's poem seeks the (im)possibilities involving kin-making with such a creature that always seems to swerve away. Farrier explores how "jellyfish bring the challenge of loving the unloved other, and of the poetics of *kin-making*, into sharp focus" (96). And it is in his discussion of Doty's poems where Farrier foregrounds the potency of a

diffractive poetics, that “bending away from the linear and self-same to reveal” (97). Ultimately, the jellyfish “recedes” from the poem and from the human, complicating any effort in making kin (98). Even so, the poem, and Farrier’s exploration of it, entangle the reader with this on going poetics of diffraction so as to deepen our intimacy, curiosity, dread, and wonder with the creatures even as they float beyond our imaginative and poetic “grasp.”

Another category Anthropocene Poetics “bursts asunder” is none other than the well-known phrase in ecocritical circles: real work. (Along with Gary Snyder, I think of William Rueckert’s field-defining essay that first formally used the term “Ecocriticism,” for Rueckert is most concerned with the work a poem accomplishes with respect to the “biospheric health” of the planet [see Rueckert 77, 79, 81, 83-5]). However, Farrier focuses in on the *real work* a poem can get done in terms of biospheric health in the explicit age of the Anthropocene. He invites readers to respond to the strange intimacy when, through art, a hyper-awareness of “deep time [becomes] embodied in seemingly ephemeral plastic” (53), but make no mistake. Farrier does not offer any superficial “hope.” Rather, his work tends toward the “ongoing process of multispecies *poiesis*” that is “a perpetual mutual making” (128). Often, though, we might assume a “perpetual mutual making” is *hopeful* — but the making is too strange to be reduced in this way. In the discussion of Christian Bök’s “eternal poem,” for instance, we see a poet who uses a chemical alphabet to stitch the poem into the gene-sequence of a bacterium’s DNA, which ensures the poem’s existence far into the deep future (114 ff). Such a making calls for a strange intimacy and yet cold distancing with whom (or what) the co-making is with and what kind of intelligent lifeform from the future may complete the rhetorical triangle through a “swerve toward relation” that may take millions of years to come to fruition (121).

One observation, though, is that Farrier’s work reflects the state of current affairs in ecocriticism. In the 2019 summer issue of ISLE, Scott Slovic discusses his presentation at the 2019 ASLE conference. Using data analytics to analyze “4,433,665 words that appeared in all issues of ISLE from 2004 to 2018,” Slovic and Dave Markowitz deduce how the field “trends toward increasing word count, increasing use of jargon, and a decline of concreteness” (513). Concerning jargon, readers outside of ecopoetics may struggle to gain access to the terms Farrier uses — terms that, in the present moment, heft up the field: kin-making, diffractive poetics, chthulucene, symbiopoetic, hyperobjects, geophilia, and even the term Anthropocenic. I am not suggesting, though, that this is a negative criticism. I cannot imagine how Farrier could make his argument

without these terms. Farrier provides solid definitions (complete with brief discussions of their nuances and history) which should give readers from outside the field enough traction to access the argument. What is more, Farrier grounds his work in the concreteness of, dare I say it, close reading. He provides close readings not just of the poems; the chapters (and subsections of chapters) often begin with an astute reading of a contemporary, perplexing work of art or a discussion of the nuances surrounding a current environmental crisis. Such moves invite readers from interdisciplinary contexts into the lines of flight at work between the many sources of Farrier's exploration.

If I had to distill the project into one word, it would be Borges's "Aleph" which Farrier discusses in his first chapter: "a miraculous point in space that contains within it all other points" (21). One readily adds *a miraculous point in time that contains within it all other times*, for Farrier is focused on how deep pasts and deep futures infuse the "lyric now" of the poem, and how the poem functions to develop intimacy in the vastness of Deep Time in all of the entanglements and possibilities of *making kin*. All of this is heightened in the age of the Anthropocene, for the Anthropocene functions as a "spur to the imagination to rethink and reconfigure relations" that include the poem and Deep Time (17). Such a poetics concerns not just poems written in the last seven decades but any poem from the past that develops a sense of intimacy with the entanglements stretching across Deep Time.

Farrier shows us how the poem, as Aleph and with a "multiscalar sensibility" (35), provides a way for us to rethink just what a poem is and what a poem does in this age of the Anthropocene.

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