

## Toward an Eco-poetics of Randomness and Design: An Introduction

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In memoriam  
Jack Collom  
(1931 - 2017)

What eco-poetics is and what it does, how it relates to but also exceeds eco-poetry, and the nature of its relationship to the more general *poiesis* (“making”) at work in the material universe remain open and thorny questions. Moreover, what are the insights from the more specialised field of experimental eco-poetry that we may bring to our understanding of eco-poetics in general, whatever the genre and material support on which environmentally-inflected *poiesis* deploys itself?

As this Special Focus section shows, one may begin to answer such questions by taking into account notions of *randomness* and *design*, concepts that operate in experimental texts and the material universe at large, but which have not been sufficiently foregrounded in the ongoing theoretical debate on eco-poetics. Any sustained effort to understand how randomness and design permeate eco-poetics requires a vision of eco-poetics that goes beyond (eco)poetry. Providing some examples of what such a broader vision of eco-poetics might look like is also one of the goals of this Special Focus.

Unfolding in three stages, this introductory essay will first map out the elements and orientations that inform the debates on eco-poetics, while also touching upon the adjacent territories of geopoetics, zoopoetics, *écopoétique* and *Ökopoetik*. A second part will meditate on the elusive concepts of randomness and design, and on how eco-poetics might be considered a form of adaptive mapping of their ever-fluid entanglement. The third part, finally, presents the contributions to this Special Focus section and surveys the different facets of the co-constitutive operations of randomness and design explored in each.

### Mapping the Terrains of Eco-poetics

The term “eco-poetics” is commonly used in relation to environmentally orientated poetry and specifically in relation to experimental or innovative poetry that

foregrounds (defamiliarised and defamiliarising) language as a means to encounter and engage with the more-than-human world (e.g. see Killingsworth [2004], Knickerbocker [2012], Keller [2017], Stout [2016], Nolan [2017]). Brought to the attention of poetry criticism by German scholar Lothar Hönnighausen in a 1995 essay on the nature poets Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry,<sup>1</sup> and by Jonathan Bate in his influential study *The Song of the Earth* (2000),<sup>2</sup> the term *ecopoetics* is today more frequently associated with Jonathan Skinner's eponymous journal of avant-gardist writing and criticism. Published between 2001 and 2009, *ecopoetics* explored "creative-critical edges between writing, with an emphasis on poetry, and ecology, the theory and praxis of living on earth" (Skinner, "Ecopoetics" 329). Indeed, in the "Editor's Statement" of the first issue, Skinner expressed the hope that the journal would function as "an edge (as in edge of the meadow, or shore, rather than leading edge) where different disciplines can meet and complicate one another" (6), and thus help to "subvert endless debates about 'language' vs. lyric, margin vs. mainstream, performed vs. written, innovative vs. academic, or, [...] digitized vs. printed approaches to poetry" (6). Sixteen years later, Skinner would propose that we think of *ecopoetics* as

arranged like "compass points," from sounding at true north through conceptual, documentary, and situationist practices, to boundary work (a focus on systems) at the south and "mestizo" poetics of relation in the southwest, through the important "big picture" work of theory and essay writing due west, to disrupted "third landscapes" in the northwest passage of our collective future. ("Ecopoetics" 330)

Mapping the terrain of *ecopoetics* in this manner points to the many modes, styles, and forms *ecopoetics* can take. Conceived of as an *investigative practice*, *ecopoetics* thus approaches the environment as a "site for poetic attention and exchange, where many different types of making [...] come to inform and be informed" (Skinner, "Statement" 128). It becomes clear that "*ecopoetics* may be more productively approached as a discursive site, to which many different kinds of poetry can contribute, [rather] than as the precinct of a particular kind of 'eco' poetry" (Skinner, "Ecopoetics" 329).

While Skinner emphasises the centrality of poetry for the project of *ecopoetics*, he also suggests that *ecopoetics* exceeds both poetry and writing. As he comments in an interview with Angela Hume:

However, one important aspect of *ecopoetics* entails what happens off the page, in terms of where the work is sited and performed, as well as what methods of composition, or decomposition, precede and follow the poem—the modes of research, documentation, or collaboration that the work takes up and generates. (Hume et al. 760)

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<sup>1</sup> In his article, Hönnighausen defines *ecopoetics* as "the special poetics emerging from ecological concerns, reflections relating questions of poetic form to the more comprehensive socio-political and moral philosophy inspiring them" (281).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Song of the Earth*, Bate famously noted: "Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place—the prefix *eco-* is derived from the Greek *oikos*, 'the home or place of dwelling.' According to this definition, poetry will not necessarily be synonymous with verse: the poeming of the dwelling is not inherently dependent on metrical form. However, the rhythmic, syntactic and linguistic intensifications that are characteristic of verse-writing frequently give a particular force to the *poiesis*: it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language's most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because meter itself—a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat—is an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself" (75-76).

Recent publications in the field of eco-poetics are a testament to the fact that scholarship has increasingly begun to consider the question of eco-poetics in works other than poetry. Whether they discuss gardening/landscaping (Skinner, "Gardens"), an art installation (Rigby), a community performance project (Kuppers), or fables, essays, and novels in a variety of genres (Middelhoff et al.), all these publications on eco-poetics explore manifestations of *ecopoiesis*, that is, manifestations of a "house-making [...] converging on the *oikos*, the planet Earth that is the only known home for life as we know it" (Skinner, "Eco-poetics" 329). As Petra Kuppers writes in her essay on the "Salamander Project," a collaborative piece in which artists with disability creatively documented their experiences of swimming in public pools on camera as well as in writing:

I conceive of eco-poetics work as going beyond the page, of blowing up from the two-dimensional capture of data on white paper, toward engaging audiences in an embodied poetics. If the point is to change the world, do we not need to place our eco-poetic adventures in public view? If interdependency and collaboration are at stake, do we not need to invite others, not yet part of our project, to witness and to shift standpoints incrementally? What is activism for aesthetic politics, and how can it find audiences? (Kuppers 124)

Eco-poetics, as we define it in this Special Focus section, then, does not designate a certain type of text or poetic object. It is not merely eco-poetry. Rather, without necessarily turning its back on literature and writing, it goes "beyond the page" and refers to a broad array of artistic, activist, and performative practices (including but also going beyond poetry) that examine the non-human world, human-world relations, and the conditions, possibilities, and limits of the knowledges, ethics, and politics such examinations may produce.

Adjacent to the discursive investigative site of eco-poetics lie two other poetic terrains invested in explorations of the more-than-human world, albeit with a different emphasis: geopoetics and zoopoetics. Associated primarily with Kenneth White, a Scottish poet who has been living in France since the 1970s, geopoetics combines geography, cosmology, and philosophy (White 173), and refers to "a field of presence and activity which has poietic characteristics," whereby *poiesis* is understood in Heideggerian and Nietzschean tradition as a "poem-act that tries to appropriate the world" (White 172). According to White, this poem-act "has little in common with what is habitually known as 'poetry'" (White 172), even though he himself looks to special poetry—Whitman, Perse, Eliot, Olson, Rilke, Michaux—to flesh out his theories. It is thus only appropriate when French geocritic Bertrand Westphal claims that "[g]eopoetics focuses on the intertwining of the biosphere, poetry, and poetics," while taking an "ecological" as well as "global" perspective (xi). Indeed, American poet and scholar Eric Magrane describes geopoetics in similar ways in his article "Situating Geopoetics" (2015), where he calls for "geopoetic texts and practices that draw on the work of poets as well as geographers, [and thus] for an enchanted, earthy, and transaesthetic approach that moves to bring together contemporary poetics, particularly in the realm of eco-poetics, with critical human geography" (Magrane 2).

While geopoetics foregrounds human evocations of the inanimate non-human world in the form of different kinds of "creative geography" (Magrane 4), zoopoetics, as

conceptualised by Aaron Moe, shifts the focus of investigation toward the ways in which “nonhuman animals shape the form of human writing” (“Toward Zoopoetics” 2). Suggesting that “nonhuman animals (*zoion*) are makers (*poiesis*), and [...] have agency in that making” (2), Moe asserts that, “when a poet undergoes the making process of *poiesis* in harmony with the gestures and vocalisations of nonhuman animals, a multispecies event occurs” (2). As Frederike Middelhoff and Sebastian Schönbeck point out in their introduction to *Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Eco-poetics* (2019), zoopoetics and eco-poetics are mutually co-constitutive, since “animals—be it those in or outside literature—cannot be fully grasped without their environments, whereas, in turn, environments cannot be conceived without the animals living in and affecting them” (14). When Middelhoff and Schönbeck propose an “eco-zoopoetics” (17), they do so in order to promote “the study of the relationships between and the *agencies* of literature, animals, and environments” (17; emphasis added), highlighting one of the issues—the issue of human as well as non-human agency—that is also a key concern in several contributions to this Special Focus section.

While contemporary scholarship on eco-poetics sometimes invokes indigenous and postcolonial conceptualisations of *poiesis*, Anglo-American debates are often the main point of reference, even when scholars work comparatively or on non-Anglophone literatures about the more-than-human world. Yet, if one looks beyond the Anglophone world and beyond English as the primary language of eco-poetics in practice (and criticism), the discursive terrains of *écopoétique* and *Ökopoetik* invite closer inspection.<sup>3</sup>

At times, *écocritique* appears nearly interchangeable with the term *écopoétique*, whilst at others critics endow it with much more precise connotations. In part, this is due to one essential difference between the English-speaking and French-speaking ecocritical communities: in Anglophone ecocriticism, the focus on eco-aesthetics constitutes one approach to the natureculture continuum amongst many others and is, consequently, rarely considered separately from issues pertaining to identity politics or scientific ecological paradigms (Blanc et al., 18-22; Bouvet and Posthumus 386-87). By contrast, French-language ecocriticism has been wary of a U.S.-style ecocriticism heavily marked by the ideological critique of cultural studies and, like the latter, leaning towards a radically revisionist canon. What French-language scholars particularly reject is a canon that becomes so exclusive as to sever eco-literature from the *belles lettres*, aestheticism, and ideals of universalism, which all three remain highly valued in the French intellectual tradition (Schoentjes 22-23; also see Bouvet and Posthumus 386).

For Francophone ecocriticism, aesthetics (i.e. artifice not driven by mimesis [Pughe 71-72]) and *poiesis* as text-making are seen as productive practices that are able to retrain environmental perception (Blanc et al. 17, 22) and constitute an “unsuspected resource of ecological thought” (see Sylvain and Vadean n. p.; our translation). Therefore, important intersections do exist between Skinner’s experimental eco-poetics

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<sup>3</sup> This section focuses on debates surrounding eco-poetics in the Anglo-American, German, and French tradition. This is not to say, however, that there is no debate in the Spanish-speaking world. Gisela Heffes, for instance, uses “*ecopoéticas*” (14) in her article “Para una ecocrítica latinoamericana” (2014) as a translation of *ecopoetics*. However, Heffes’s essay does not expand on the issue of eco-poetics, focusing instead on the broader question of whether and how North American ecocritical approaches can be translated into and made productive for Latin American contexts.

and *écopoétique*, with the former more open to the ideological dimensions of *poiesis* and the latter more prone to primarily emphasise “*aisthesis*, i.e. the ability (or inability) of a literary text to offer us a new way of gazing upon our relation to the natural world” (Pughe 79). In part, these intersections are also due to the grounding of *écopoétique* in literary geography and landscape studies (Bouvet and Posthumus 385), Bertrand Westphal’s geocriticism, and Kenneth White’s geopoetics.<sup>4</sup> All of these influences feed into *écopoétique* and its exploration of how formal/aesthetic qualities displace biocentrism.<sup>5</sup>

French ecocriticism may still be in the process of trying to delineate its specificities as against the Anglo-American schools (Bouvet and Posthumus, 386-89; Finch-Race and Weber, “Éditorial” 1-3). However, overall, Francophone approaches privilege an *écopoétique* understood as a probing into the *productivity* of the acts of writing and reading (Pughe 68-69; Blanc et al. 25-27; Schoentjes 23). It is through an investigation of the “nature of writing” that one explores the “nature of nature” (Pughe 69; our translation). Instead of ideology and ecological science, “c’est précisément l’écriture qui permet la modélisation de l’action humaine avec l’environnement” (Pughe 73). This *modélisation* (which variously translates as “modelling,” “design,” or “mapping”) of the inter- and intra-actions between humans and their environment supposes less a mimetic attunement of writing to nature than a re-invention, re-fashioning, and re-enchantment through defamiliarisation (Pughe 79), a genuine *travail*. This recurrent term (particularly see Blanc et al. 21-23) is a rich French homonym which can equally refer to work and toil, to intellectual, spiritual, or physical labour (including child-bearing labour), or to the energy expended or transferred by forces in the domain of physics. In other words, *un travail*, including the kind performed by *écopoétique*, supposes friction and effort, be they material or immaterial.

Compared to the terrains of eco-poetics and *écopoétique*, the discursive site of *Ökopoetik* remains a relatively new, yet all the more dynamic field of research.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Geocriticism has been particularly influential for *écopoétique* in terms of Westphal’s methodology, which is based on the “four key concepts [of] multifocalisation, polysensoriality, stratigraphy and intertextuality” (Bouvet and Posthumus 395). Geopoetics, by contrast, has been an influential model because it “includes critical analysis of maps, landscapes, land art, etc.” and embraces subjectivity, encouraging “the personal, individual approach of the literary critic who willingly follows the text where it leads him or her, into biology, geography, geology, philosophy, even to other cultures, regions, places, if need be” (Bouvet and Posthumus 396).

<sup>5</sup> This is strikingly exemplified in Pierre Schoentjes’s locus-orientated collection of essays, *Ce qui a lieu. Essai d’écopoétique* (2015), but also in various recently published special issues: Daniel Finch-Race and Julien Weber’s *French Ecocriticism/L’Écocritique française* (2017); Bénédicte Meillon and Margot Lauwers’s *Lieux d’enchantement: approches écocritiques et écopoét(h)iques des liens entre humains et non-humains* (2018), which exemplifies *poiesis* at work in and beyond literature, especially in the *écopoétique* of plant-like designs and of urban environments; and Daniel Finch-Race’s *Poetics of Place* (2019), with its inclusion of 19th-century poetics and a dialogue with Italo-phonetic poetics.

<sup>6</sup> Following Axel Goodbody, Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer relate the belated arrival of ecocriticism in Germany to the absence, in the German tradition, of a prominent tradition of nature writing as well as to a reluctance, among German academics, to espouse an avowedly political, in their minds “ideological” approach to studying literature (15-16). Hubert Zapf remarks that the integration of ecocritical approaches into the theoretical toolbox of literary scholars in Germany was delayed by the overall importance of “philological and cultural-constructivist approaches” in German literary studies (269), and by “a deeply engrained skepticism about any essentialist notions of nature” (269) in reaction to the eco-



Scholarship frequently points to a long tradition of eco-poetic debate in the German-speaking world grounded in *Naturphilosophie* (see Goodbody, *Nature*; see also Zapf 272) and *Naturästhetik* (see Zemanek). Revitalised by ecocritics interested in German literature and thought, this debate has generated a number of recent publications discussing *Naturpoetik* (see Franke and Mika) and *Umweltpoetik* (Borgards et al.) as well as the poetics of *Natur-* and *Ökolyrik* (see Goodbody, “German Eco-poetry”; Zemanek and Rauscher).<sup>7</sup> However, it has so far not led to a more systematic investigation of a broader range of eco-poetic practices beyond poetry, nor to a sustained use of one select term, be it that of *Ökopoetik* or any other. Nonetheless, as the editors of *Ecological Thought in German Literature and Culture* (2017) suggest in their introduction, the insights of ecocritical scholarship focusing on German-speaking cultures may be of particular value for contemporary ecocritical debates, including debates surrounding eco-poetics (Dürbeck et al. xiv). After all, as Hubert Zapf notes, not only were German philosophy and German (Romantic) literature instrumental for Anglo-American ecocriticism and environmentalism in the past, but German (ecological) thought also remains highly relevant in the field due to an ongoing interest among ecocritics in phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger), critical theory (Adorno, Benjamin), aesthetics (Böhme), and, more recently, in how risk theory (Beck) and social systems theory (Finke) can be used to rethink (cultural) ecologies (Zapf 277-81).

Eco-poetics, whether creative or critical, has always considered language as well as politics. Especially the kind of eco-poetics writing associated with Language Poetry can be seen not merely as an avant-gardist practice addressing environmental issues, but as one invested too in language as a form of (Marxist) ideology critique.<sup>8</sup> Although “intersectional scholarship on eco-poetics is still just beginning to emerge” (Hume and Osborne 3), recent publications have broadened the scope of what such ideological critique might mean and do by foregrounding, amongst others, questions of race,<sup>9</sup>

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nativist/econationalist discourses of the Nazi era. If this is true for ecocriticism at large, it is certainly also, if not more true for scholarship concerned with eco-poetics, a field of inquiry in which matters of language (and the ideologies in which language is entangled) are key, preventing easy translation of concepts.

<sup>7</sup> In his article “German Eco-poetry,” Axel Goodbody uses the term eco-poetry “in the wider sense encountered in English” (264) in order to discuss a historical development in German verse from “nature poetry” to “environmental poetry” and finally “[p]oetry of the Anthropocene” (266). In a move also common in Anglo-American ecocriticism, he defines nature poetry as poetry that “conjures up images of timeless nature and the integration of humans in a harmonious whole” (266), while describing “environmental poetry” as a poetry that “locate[s] humanity outside the sphere of the natural, castigating the damage wrought in the course of technological development, economic growth, and the emergence of the consumer society in the decades after the Second World War” (266). “Poetry in the Anthropocene,” he determines, is different from its predecessors because it “recognises on the one hand that nature is constantly changing, has history and is subject to human influence on a global scale,” but also on the other hand “undermines the traditional dualistic understanding of nature and culture” (266).

<sup>8</sup> Angela Hume’s 2012 interview with four practitioners of eco-poetics—Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner—implies a historical focus of eco-poetics on Marxist critique, when she broaches the politics of eco-poetics by addressing and discussing with the four poets the direct link between ecological crisis and capitalism, before moving on to other political questions (see Hume et al.).

<sup>9</sup> Critiquing scholarship on eco-poetics for its lack of inclusivity and blindness to the contributions of poets of colour to the field of eco-poetics, Evie Shockley’s chapter “Black and Green: On the Nature of Ed Roberson’s Poetics,” from her study *Renegade Poetics* (2011), argues that the African-American poet Ed Roberson “uses his distinctive poetics, including an unpredictably disrupted and disruptive hypotactic

gender,<sup>10</sup> disability,<sup>11</sup> indigeneity,<sup>12</sup> and sexuality/queerness.<sup>13</sup> Many of these recent eco-poetic publications, like other ones in the field, draw insights from New Materialism and the kind of ecofeminist philosophy that saw a resurgence with the materialist turn. Consequently, they reflect not only on matters of language and politics, but also on the language and politics of matter. Reading the poetry of the U.S.-American poets A. R. Ammons, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, and Kenneth Goldsmith, ecocritic Sarah Nolan, for example, proposes an “unnatural eco-poetics” that “focuses on how material elements, ranging from a tree to a taxi cab, intertwine with nonmaterial subjective experiences and express agency through the foregrounded textual space” (13). Comparing the work of U.S.-American poet Juliana Spahr and Turkish novelist Latife Tekin, Meliz Ergin, on her part, investigates an “eco-poetics of entanglement” that “opens (post)human subjectivity to affective connections with nonhuman otherness without compromising the possibility of political agency and accountability” (2). Relatedly, Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola propose a “queer eco-poetics” that “pursues human and nonhuman associations beyond the conventions of heteronormative family bonds and anthropocentric ecological ones” (139). By examining conditions of “ecological proximity and precarity” (146), Hume and Rahimtoola assert, queer eco-poetics “exposes ‘the other’ to be a fiction that forecloses possibilities for community, yet also insists on the complexity and reality of our differences” (146) and “imagines new possibilities for attachment, kinship, and care” (146). While the approaches and methodologies of these scholars differ, they all think about the ways in which eco-poetics works to blur alleged binary oppositions—whether of the material and non-material, natural and unnatural, or human and non-human—and helps to imagine alternative relations, ethics, and politics. Likewise, the issues broached by these scholars include, but are by no means limited to matters of embodiment and agency, questions of sustainability and environmental justice, as well as reflections on the politics of form.

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phrasing, to illustrate not merely the interrelation, but the identity, of the natural and the political realms” (149).

<sup>10</sup> Laura Severin’s “A Scottish Eco-poetics: Feminism and Environmentalism in the Works of Kathleen Jamie and Valerie Gillies” (2011), like much of ecofeminist scholarship, suggests that ecofeminist art must break down boundaries in order to change human perceptions of nature and imagine alternative ways of living in the world.

<sup>11</sup> In “Enough Defined: Disability, Eco-poetics, and Larry Eigner,” George Hart argues that Larry Eigner “fuses disability poetics with eco-poetics” in a poetry that undertakes a “continual search for what is enough” and thus seeks to establish “balance between two forms of embodiment, disability and eco-poetics” (156).

<sup>12</sup> Hsinya Huang’s article “Toward Transpacific Eco-poetics: Three Indigenous Texts,” for example, argues for a “transpacific and transindigenous eco-poetics that promises to preserve an ocean and offer a vision of transnational belonging, ecological confederation, and indigenous solidarity” (121), and brings to the fore “an alternative model of reckoning space, place, and time that requires active, participatory engagement with the Pacific seascapes while simultaneously necessitating a planetary consciousness” (121).

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, the special cluster of *ISLE* on “Queering Eco-poetics” (Spring 2018), edited by Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola, which features “recent queer eco-poetics scholarship to chart how scholars are beginning to grasp poetry’s relationship to queer theories and ecologies,” and in doing so “extend Anzaldúa’s work of queering eco-poetics by tackling questions of queer kinship and environmental relation, critiquing heterocentric aspects of mainstream environmentalism, and decolonizing eroticism from the prohibitions of Western modernity” (135).

## Mapping the Terrains of an Eco-poetics of Randomness and Design

### *An Entangled Reconfiguring of Authorship*

As this exploratory survey makes clear, a number of the concerns found on the eco-poetic map implicitly touch on the concepts of “randomness” and “design,” but these two notions tend to remain embedded more than explicitly foregrounded in scholarly expositions of eco-poetics, even fairly recent and groundbreaking ones like Hume and Osborne’s. One does not (yet) encounter the kind of open acknowledgement of the part played by “chance” and “indeterminacy” in eco-poetics that one finds, for instance, in journal articles published in the field of architecture and the visual arts,<sup>14</sup> or in some of the seminal monographs published in material ecocriticism (outside the field of eco-poetics proper),<sup>15</sup> or still in creative writing journals like *ecopoetics*, *Jacket2*, or *How2*, to name but these. In the case of such experimental writing magazines, whose style is not confined by the constraints of “pure” academic theorisation, reflection on eco-poetics becomes inseparably entangled with (eco)poetic fashioning and *poietic* processes, registering the elements of randomness as well as design at work in both.

Whether invoked by actual name in more discursive types of analysis and reflection, or enacted on the page at the level of actual compositional procedure, “randomness” and “design,” and related notions like “chance” and “accident” versus “intention” and “arbitrariness,” explicitly come to the fore in these experimental poetry journals. Indeed, many of the pieces contained in them are characterised by recombinant and aleatory practices involving the recycling of found art, pollination leading to genre bending, or contamination of the text by non-human agencies and deep immersion in them in an attempt to better soak them in. A telling example of the way in which non-linear practices register the forces of randomness and design is offered in a poem by Bernadette Mayer (born 1945) published in *Jacket2* in March 2016. Mayer’s piece reflects on the possibilities and limits of (poetic) design by blending the linearity of axiomatic statement and syntactical constraint with mock theoretical discourse and the proliferation of playful free association:

design what design does design how design many design you design get design tired  
[...][...][...] words over with over poems over made over be rectangular mean rectangular  
not rectangular something rectangular covering spaces the spaces things spaces some  
spaces of spaces [...](“Design What Design Does” n. p.)

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, representative articles like Michael Eckerley’s “Randomness, Rules and Compositional Structure in Design” (1990) and Lily Díaz’s “By Chance, Randomness and Indeterminacy Methods in Art and Design” (2011).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, in a seminal study like Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), as can be expected from an argument leaning on subatomic physics, there are 51 occurrences of the term “design” and 75 of the term “indeterminacy.” In the equally foundational *Material Ecocriticism* (2014) edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, next to “random” and “design,” a number of affiliated terms such as, for example, “assemblage,” “causality,” “autopoiesis,” “emergence,” and “proliferation” punctuate the collection of essays, as immediately revealed by a scan of the Index.



In their attempt to map the relation between words and the space of both composition and imaginative emergence, texts like Mayer's not only do justice to Skinner's seminal definition of eco-poetics as a site of tension and investigation ("Editor's Statement" 6). They also probe into questions of "randomness" and "design" by enmeshing them in a way reminiscent of an (eco)poet like John Cage, who modelled human creation on the non-linear way in which nature operates by generating "a cacophony [...] of linguistic excess" (Jaeger, "The Imitation" 112), a cacophony which

departs from the tradition of nature writing from the outset, because instead of referencing an object in the natural world or a topological scene

it self-consciously foregrounds language itself as a natural phenomenon.  
(Jaeger, "The Imitation" 112)

Cage's seemingly paradoxical combination of formal causal constraint, on the one hand, and of intentional yielding to the *poietic* energies of an impermanent more-than-human universe "in a continual state of flux" (Jaeger, "Introduction" 4),<sup>16</sup> on the other, brings to mind a variety of contemporary instances of eco-poetic fashioning in which authorial control is diminished, whilst not veering into the completely unstructured or chaotic. This reduction of authorial control in favour of the *poietic* forces of more-than-human agentic materials can be of two orders: consciously willed, or instead endured by and imposed upon the fashioner by the raw materials themselves, sometimes even violently so. An approach like the "metabolic poetics" of Canadian poet Adam Dickinson (born 1974) more than aptly illustrates the incorporation of creative trajectories beyond human determination into a poetic work, with "chemical and microbial testing" on the poet's actual body leading to poems whose "narrative sequence" unfolds like "hormones [...] dependent on *cascading, sequential processes*" (Dickinson n. p.; added emphasis).

How more-than-human agencies (re-)write human anatomy and transform human creative fashioning materialises very differently in the case of San Francisco Bay Area, Beat-associated painter Jay DeFeo (1929-1989). Her monumental sculpture-in-paint *The Rose*, over which she laboured from 1958 to 1966,<sup>17</sup> kept shifting in unanticipated ways, forcing her to constantly reshape it (Miller 24, 29-31, 38). In fact, the accreted layers of paint were not only resculpting themselves, but the act of reshaping also ended up refashioning the body of the artist by causing cancer in part induced by the toxic lead in the paint used to coat the canvas over and over (artist Bruce Conner qtd. in "A Place for A Rose" n. p.).

As different as the scenarios of Dickinson's and DeFeo's "metabolic" reconfiguration of authorship are, an important element unites their art and bodies as sites of eco-poetic experimentation that explore the tensions of human and non-human forms of proliferation, as Skinner proposes it. In creations like theirs, "design" certainly alternates and finds itself at odds with "randomness." But this is not all: each in their

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<sup>16</sup> Cage, for instance, introduced "chance operations" based on the tossing of coins "in the traditional manner prescribed by the *I Ching*" so as "to determine the number and duration of sounds in musical composition" (Jaeger, "Introduction" 4).

<sup>17</sup> More than another two decades have to be added if one considers the artist's struggles to exhibit and conserve this very unstable sculpture.

respective way, Dickinson and DeFeo reveal the fluctuating demarcation between the “willingly caused” and “accidentally indeterminate.” Dickinson cannot control what hormones do any more than DeFeo can govern the mutations of successive layers of paint. Hence “their” artistic design morphs into partial randomness, at least temporarily until this impure randomness reconfigures itself again into partial, human-generated design, once Dickinson and DeFeo embrace the generative sequencing of an agentic material over which they have no ascendancy. What experimental *poietic*/poetic practice across various media and supports repeatedly suggests, then, is that randomness and design are always *co-constitutive*. By analogy with the ecological reality of the ecotone,<sup>18</sup> one may even go as far as to say that the grey area of highly productive entanglement between these two notions forms a conceptual ecotone zone, which may be precisely why these two principles readily lend themselves to the sites of material-creative tension that eco-poetic practice investigates.

### *Eco-poetics as a Site of Adaptive Mapping*

What the examples of both Dickinson and DeFeo also illustrate is that eco-poetic practice exceeds poetry, and that like most art originally, it forms an attempt to map the shifting area where randomness and design spill into another, whether this intermingling be voluntary or suffered. Precisely because eco-poetics is not equivalent to poetry and vice versa, artistic fashioning emerges as a practice of adaptation to the environment, a reading that also proves relevant, in fact, to the seven contributions gathered in this Special Focus section. Without necessarily subscribing to all the tenets of evolutionary psychology, certain of its axioms cannot be ignored, particularly the ones that raise the possibility that *poietic* fashioning and human *poiesis* more broadly may themselves respond to the *poietic* potential of the environment and the more-than-human material world. As Joseph Carroll reminds us, “the most distinctive feature of the specifically human mind—the feature that distinguishes it most from that of its primate cousins—is the emergence of a flexible general intelligence that enables humans to adapt to variations within an environment that is itself complex and unstable” (192). As a result of this flexibility,

humans have a special need to *fabricate mental maps of models* that make sense of the world and provide behavioral directives that can take the place of instinctive behavioral patterns. For these mental maps or models to be effective in providing behavioral directives, they must be emotionally saturated, imaginatively vivid. Art and cultural artifacts like religion and ideology meet this demand. They fulfill a necessary adaptive function, that of regulating the human cognitive behavioral system. The arts provide emotionally saturated images and aesthetic constructs that produce a sense of total cognitive order and that help regulate the other behavioral systems. [...] Humans have a

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<sup>18</sup> The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines an ecotone as “a transitional area of vegetation between two different plant communities, such as forest and grassland. It has some of the characteristics of each bordering biological community and often contains species not found in the overlapping communities. [...] The influence of the two bordering communities on each other is known as the edge effect” (“Ecotone” n. p.). In his own conceptual transposition of the term to the field of eco-poetics, the poet Christopher Arigo reminds us that the word ecotone “is derived from the Greek from the word *tonos* meaning tension. So literally an ecotone is a place where ecologies are in tension” (n. p.).

universal and irrepressible need to fabricate this sort of order, and satisfying that need provides a distinct form of pleasure and fulfillment. (Carroll 194; added emphasis)

Read as an activity of adaptive mapping, art-making can thus be seen as a process that helps the human mind negotiate the highly fluctuating nature of the so-called “real.” Such a view of *poiesis*/making appears not only readily compatible with, but also begins to clarify what eco-poetics may accomplish as an investigative practice that acknowledges the grey zone between order and chaos, between authorial control vindicated and authorial control relinquished.

Despite global warming and its increasingly dramatic consequences, it is safe to assume that prehistoric people had a very different sense of impermanence and contingency, especially from those of us living relatively safely and luxuriously in the global North. Faced with a highly dangerous and unpredictable environment, their drawing on walls, fashioning of amulets, or fabrication of tools that combined the artful and the useful were linked to survival at the most elementary level. However, if the sources of what humans perceive as chaos or order in their immediate environment have changed and are, indeed, continuing to change (maybe today more drastically so than at most other times in human history), there endures a need for mapping the islands of relative stability amidst the flows of perturbation in which human selves are inextricably submerged. At the more disenchanting end of the spectrum of sublimity, climate change—together with the catastrophic weather phenomena, water and food shortages, and the enforced migrations it causes—makes it clear to us that the building blocks of “reality” do not offer the immutable surroundings that we once deluded ourselves we possessed and controlled. At the less disenchanting end of the spectrum of sublimity, we might relish engaging with the patterns unveiled by empirical observation and testing in the hard sciences, whose picture of probability, order, and disorder does actually not prove at odds with the worldview developed by some ancient, non-theistic, non-teleological forms of mysticism (see Capra, *Tao*), or, for that matter, with some of the alternative worldviews of indigenous and otherwise marginalised peoples.

It is, of course, not possible to review in this introduction all the varieties of disorder and (self-)organisation as they apply to living systems and as they have been theorised by different branches of contemporary science—from physics to biology. Nor would it be feasible to give a detailed account of how different tributaries to epistemological thinking—from philosophy to ecospirituality—have, over time, developed the notions of chaos and order in their combined “study of substance (or structure) and [...] study of form (or pattern)” (Capra, *The Web* 81). However, ever so briefly dwelling on but two exemplary and complementary visions of the universe—one from non-linear, non-dualist physics, the other from non-linear, non-dualist philosophy—will alert us to the fact that blindness to randomness, design, and the grey zone of impurity that the constantly ongoing entanglement of the two creates, would amount, in actuality, to remaining blind to the very fluctuating nature of ourselves, our environment, and even ourselves *in* our environment.

Indeed, what subatomic/quantum physics, for instance, highlights is that pattern and indeterminacy are central to the processual dynamics of the living, alternating as it does between temporary equilibrium and instability, chance and necessity (Prigogine and Stengers 200-201, 239-64; Capra, *Tao* 88-93, 229-47, 249-72; Capra, *The Web* 121-50, 172-88). When sub-atomic particles are made to collide with one another to create new ones, randomness (irreversible trajectories of becoming dictated by chance and unpredictability) and design (irreversible trajectories determined by laws leading to certain patterns) are at the centre of the relational activity and transformation underpinning the self-organisation of matter and energy. Moreover, next to an absence of reversibility, whereby design breaks away from the predictability of patterns that prevails in mechanistic dualism (Prigogine and Stengers 79-80, 82), quantum physics also points to a need to understand design more in terms of *impermanence* and *probable becoming* than as stable, enduring structure. As Capra notes: "At the subatomic level, matter does not exist with certainty at definite places, but rather shows 'tendencies to exist,' and atomic events do not occur with certainty at definite times and in definite ways, but rather show 'tendencies to occur'" (*Tao* 77-78).

When it comes to accounting for the co-existence of change and stability in the universe, the view from the quantum physics laboratory also reminds us that "balance" and "equilibrium"—ideals often longed for in naive forms of holism from which ecocritical discourse is not always immune—are not compatible with the energies of the living. These energies can only be described through ever more complex, non-linear mathematical equations (Capra, *The Web* 177), since living organisms depend on always evolving design open to exchange, and since "an organism in equilibrium is a dead organism" (176). Precisely because "a living organism is characterised by continual flow and change in its metabolism, involving thousands of chemical reactions" (175), the universe has to be seen not through the filter of structure only. Rather it has to be seen through the lens of what Ilya Prigogine calls "dissipative structures," that is, open systems that include "points of instability at which new structures and forms of order can emerge" (175). Such a vision of open systems brings into focus "the coexistence of structure and change, of 'stillness and motion'" (175). Further reinforcing the paradoxical nature of form and formlessness in what appears to be an oxymoronic universe, there is the fact that at the so-called "bifurcation point" where new kinds of order can arise (187), it is impossible to predict how a given system will behave. Ultimately, then, indeterminacy accompanies the potentially spontaneous emergence of "new structures of higher *order* and complexity" (187; original emphasis).

Natural *poiesis* involving the co-existence of structure and change, of flourishing emergence and indeterminacy does not only occur at the level of physics, but also at the mental level and in processes of cognition. Indeed, as embodied minds entangled in a perceiver/perceived dynamic, human organisms undergo continual flow and transformation too. Amongst the forms of non-dualist epistemology, the one found in Buddhist philosophy may, across its various schools, not be

freighted with the heavy scholarly discourse of the new materialisms, though it offers similar conceptual tools. [...] The new materialist concept of the "entanglement" of living and non-living matters, or of bodily natures, may find its precedent and complement in

Buddhism's concept of dependent origination, the understanding that no one thing exists apart from another. (Gaard 291-92).

Allying pattern with contingency and unpredictability, this “codependent arising” (Varela et al. 110) supposes that “cognition is not a representation of an independent, pregiven world, but rather a bringing forth of a world [...] that is always dependent on the organism's structure” (Capra, *The Web* 263).

Next to dependent origination, Buddhist theories of cognition rely on yet another fundamental concept, namely “vacuity” or “emptiness.” Correctly understood—i.e. not nihilistically misread as “nothingness”—Buddhist “emptiness” corresponds to a level of non-dualistic experience which does not so much suggest the absence of phenomena as a dynamic fullness of impermanent but interrelated elements devoid “of a stable pre-ordained substance inherent in them, personal self included” (Bellarsi 71). According to this epistemological reading grid, “instead of being clearly separated from the phenomenal world, the self is moment by moment determined by the objects to which it relates; and vice versa, as there is no perceived without a perceiver, the relationship between them also fluctuating moment by moment” (Bellarsi 70). “[N]ot ‘fixed’ and [not] predetermined at the outset[,] but faced by a myriad of open possibilities which shape its becoming as it engages with [an] outside world” (Bellarsi 81) that is equally unstable, this “‘substanceless’ subject” constitutes a template of embodied reality that presupposes considerable randomness and perturbation interfering with the fixity of design (as is well known by meditators attentive to their own patterns of registration during meditation). However, the Buddhist model of cognition also proposes a “causal analysis of direct experience” (Varela et al. 111) in which impermanence alternates with patterned perceptual emergence. According to the so-called *Abidharma* decoding of cognition, dependent origination can be broken down into constitutive streams of elements and moments which in turn make up the psycho-physical complex (Varela et al. 110-23). These streams result from the entanglement between different types of contact occurring between different types of objects and different types of consciousnesses (Varela et al. 110-23, 256-58). In the Buddhist epistemological scheme, dependent origination thus comes together with a naturally wild *poiesis* of the mind—one which, by analogy with the vocabulary of quantum physics, teems with moments of “bifurcation.” Yet at the same time, codependent arising also admits of change-within-structure, predictability-within-unpredictability. In other words, an eco-poetics of the mind seen in terms of randomness and design is already implicitly contained in the ancient epistemology and psychology proposed by Buddhism.

If our conceptualising is to integrate the destabilising terrain of the “real” as charted, for instance, by quantum physics or Buddhist impermanence, our endeavour to understand our ecological condition and our embeddedness in the material universe supposes the processing of a disorientating world in which randomness amounts to a partial form of order, and order to a partial form of randomness. Accepting this world of dissipative structures and beginning to decode our daily experiencing in such non-dualistic terms both mean an effort of constant adaptation and remodelling. Since “[t]o



understand a pattern, we must map a configuration of relationships” (Capra, *The Web* 81), eco-poetics—as a sort of incomplete and temporary cartography-making characterised by aesthetics that accept *impure, mutually hybridising* notions of chaos and order, and the tensions between them—may indeed be construed as a tool of adaptive mapping to a reality in which, to quote the Buddha, “form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form” (Conze, *Heart Sutra* 86).

### Mapping the Terrains of the Special Focus Section

Imposing an order when dealing with the very issues of randomness and design is a highly paradoxical task, yet one that remains useful for pointing to the common themes of the contributions. Sharing an agentic conception of the material, albeit to varying extents, the seven contributors to this Special Focus Section see eco-poetics as a practice unveiling a threefold fallacy: 1) the supposed existence of “pure” randomness; 2) the supposed existence of “pure” design; and 3) the assumption of an opposition between randomness and design in terms of an allegedly absolute divide between the two. All the essays see these three suppositions as illusions that require a remapping of “reality”; and in their own way each, the seven authors understand eco-poetic fashioning as a tool whereby to initiate such a reconfiguration.

In view of the entanglement of randomness and design that all the contributors develop, in a kind of eco-poetic gesture of our own, we opted for a structure inspired by the more aleatory dynamics suggested by these very concepts. Such a dynamics—equally present in the contemporary plastic arts, music and physics—allows for both the expression of divergence and enmeshment, of thematic recycling and bifurcation. Rather than being for example grouped on the basis of the genre they discuss—poetry, the novel, or extra-literary media involving performance, architecture, or bodily movement—the articles here unfold along a more wave-like trajectory of ideas. In this “crooked” sequence, readers can, if they be so inclined, immerse themselves in common themes that get recycled and transformed from one contribution to the next, as well as in shifting perspectives that disrupt the more linear expectations of the mind and take it off the beaten poetic track. Arranged in this manner, the seven contributions also invite readers to move between the more abstract, philosophical dimensions of *poiesis* and the more concrete aspects of doing and fashioning, whereby eco-poetics fuses with ecopolitics and evolves from an aesthetics of protest into a performance (or enactment) of resistance.

Opening this collection of papers—which are all underpinned, to various degrees, by a neo-materialistic scepticism that doubts the absolute demarcation between randomness and design—the voice of poet and scholar Harvey Hix blends the reflection of philosophical enquiry and demonstration with the attentive dwelling in slower, thickening time that characterises the poetic meditation. Presenting a phenomenological argumentation unfolding along the mesmerising rhythms and cadences of a prose poem, “The Randomness Effect” muses on the indispensable role of poetics in an age where, so the line of reasoning, adequate ecological action can only result from adequate

ecological description. However, true to Skinner's conception of eco-poetics as an investigative site of exploration embracing tension and even the inevitable failure of its own project (Skinner, "Vibrational" n. p.), Hix's poetico-scholarly meditation carefully unpacks and ultimately challenges a number of received preconceptions. For him, no valid assessment of our ecological condition can emerge if the latter is not re-described in terms of three central interdependent concepts/categories: the randomness effect, influence asymmetry, and umbrasubjectivity. Not only is randomness but unperceived design, suggests Hix—hence his preference for the expression "randomness effect"—but human beings stand in an unequal, asymmetrical relation to the more-than-human world which will always exceed their power of control over it. Increasing the individual's sense of vulnerability and thereby producing a condition/feeling of umbrasubjectivity, this imbalance, Hix argues, reveals the fallacy of reading the enmeshment between the human and non-human in terms of intersubjectivity and of ethics. Resolutely deviating from any over-easy, commonplace amalgamations between ecological and ethical thinking, Hix enlists various U.S. and Canadian poetic voices to highlight that the need to (re)describe the present ecological condition points not so much toward the efficiency of ethics as toward the efficaciousness of poetics. For only an eco-poetics, that is, a *self-conscious* practice of thinking and writing, would prove capable of probing into and grappling with influence asymmetry and umbrasubjectivity.

In a shift from subjectivity experienced and rethought in the present moment to corporeality lived and transcribed in the medieval past, the contribution by Susan Morrison, "Slow Pilgrimage Eco-poetics," continues to explore *poietic* fashioning as an immersive practice. Her essay challenges the speed and linearity of time at different, overlapping levels: the physical, the subjective, the spiritual, and the linguistic/philological. Focusing on a mixed Italian-, English- and French-language corpus of fourteenth-century vernacular pilgrimage poems by Dante Alighieri, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, and Guillaume de Guileville, Morrison explains how for both pilgrim and reader, the physical and textual road become superimposed on a journey oscillating between the determinism of design and the unpredictability of contingency and the accidental (rather than randomness). Following, in part, the alternating movements that she investigates, Morrison herself oscillates between her central medieval texts and contemporary works of pilgrimage such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* or Ken Cockburn and Alec Finley's *The Road North*. Through these oscillations, Morrison highlights how the eco-poetic implies an investigative practice hinging on change and transformation. Indeed, pilgrimage eco-poetics, as she describes it, far exceeds pilgrimage (eco)poetry and its themes: not only does it involve the creation of a spiritual map by a physical effort of the body in movement on an equally physical road, but in turn, this corporeal labour also provides the experiential and eventually textual basis for the maybe even more important mental and literary travail of both poet and reader. Crucially too, Morrison shows how the oscillation between the contingent, the accidental and the designed in medieval pilgrimage poetry indirectly reveals eco-poetics as a processual phenomenon of co-creation: the road re-fashions the pilgrim (and by extension the poet and reader), while the pilgrim re-fashions the road. In the end, both

the road and the pilgrim co-create changing vernacular idioms, which can in turn act as adaptive tools for more attentive descriptions of and engagements with local ecologies.

Making us leave fourteenth-century European poetry behind for the contemporary U.S. novel, Bénédicte Meillon's essay, "Measured Chaos: EcoPoet(h)ics of the Wild in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*," also makes us turn from medieval spirituality to current forms of ecospirituality. This contribution blends elements of chaos theory with the musical theory of Joachim-Ernst Berendt, who sees the universe at large tending toward harmony out of chaotic rhythms. Enlisting Haraway's notion of a "sympoietic Gaia" (58), Meillon's analysis of the texture of Kingsolver's prose text illuminates the *poietic* circulations and pollinations at work between, on the one hand, human textual creativity, and on the other, the manifold patterns of self-organisation present in the biosphere and its diverse life forms—designs often invisible to and mistaken for randomness by the human perceiver. On the surface, Kingsolver's text and holist view of species entanglement may seem far removed from some of the more radical forms of contemporary experimental ecoPoetics discussed earlier in this introduction. Yet, Meillon's analysis of the novel's poetics will suggest to readers how Kingsolver's interlaced narrative plots (and perhaps the novelistic genre in general), much like more avant-gardist explorations of *poiesis*, actually also open themselves up to the vibrations of the biosphere and to the self-regulating tendencies of ecological systems. Meillon's view of Kingsolver's poetics as permeated by the "measured chaos" of a universe allying proportion and rhythm will certainly appeal to readers interested in the Native American forms of ecopiety having directly inspired *Prodigal Summer*. But the measured chaos analysed here will resonate too with readers researching other forms of ecopiety, such as, for instance, Hinduism and its decoding of cosmic creation in terms of sound ("Om" n. p.), or Romanticism and its view of "The mind of Man [...] framed [...] like the breath/and harmony of music" through "[...] a dark/Invisible workmanship that reconciles/Discordant elements [...]" (Wordsworth 195).

Transporting us from West to East, the essay by Tara Beaney investigates the ecoPoetics of the novel further, but breaks away from harmony and re-enchantment to delve deeper into the disharmony and disenchantment that followed the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011. The ecospiritual dimension is, however, not abandoned in this contribution, which focuses on animism and the writing of Yōko Tawada, a Japanese author also at home in the German language and German-speaking world. In "Confronting 'Unforeseen' Disasters: Yōko Tawada's Surrealist and Animistic Poetics," Beaney explores how the agentic properties of matter seep into the poetics of a novel which, in both substance and form, heavily foregrounds randomness understood as a concatenation of unforeseeable events and effects. Relying on two pivotal notions—Karen Barad's "intra-actions" between mutually constituted, entangled agencies (33) and Tim Ingold's "hylemorphic" model of creation (213), Beaney explains how in Tawada's political critique, chain-like formations of unpredictability destabilise anthropocentric conceptions of agency in general and of authorial control in particular. An animistic writer like Tawada, Beaney argues, does not only consider the outside physical world as pervaded by agentic *poiesis* and magic, but also language itself. Hence,

in a move reminiscent of Surrealism and its chance-embracing aesthetic procedures, Tawada opens novelistic design and composition to the random fluctuations of images, associations, and sounds that the animated “magic” of both world and words generates. If in Kingsolver’s universe, it is more the uncovering of design hidden beneath surface randomness that helps both protagonists and readers to free their imagination from false anthropocentric conceptions, Tawada stands at the opposite end of the spectrum, Beaney suggests: in her world, it is the disruption of design through a lack of pattern and its welcome unpredictability that liberates from the perceptual straightjacket of anthropocentrism.

Making us shift back to (eco)poetry proper and to design and mapping as tools of empowerment, Melissa Zeiger also returns our attention to the eco-poetics of walking, but this time in the form of an entirely secular, laborious, and highly precarious progression over the land of the Sonoran Desert by Mexican migrants seeking to reach the U.S. In “The Eco-poetics of Survival: *The Transborder Immigrant Tool* and *The Desert Survival Series*,” Zeiger discusses a set of poems written by Amy Sara Carroll, member of a civil disobedience art group specialising in disruptive performance. Published in both English and Spanish as part of installations as well as on a computer GPS programme, these pieces spill beyond institutional walls back into the community and are at the crossroads of several genres: didactic verse, nature poetry, digital (prose) poetry, and political poetry. Notwithstanding their apparent simplicity, and to some extent because of it, these poems function as a mapping device and tool for increasing ecological literacy that retrain the perceptions of two very different kinds of audiences. Borrowing from different traditions, this prosaic verse, explains Zeiger, does more than helping migrants to negotiate the invisible maze of the desert. It also seeks to remedy environmental blindness among (American) readers, encountering the poems in the safety of their homes or the gallery space, by giving instruction in how to re-imagine the apparent emptiness and lack of pattern of the desert as a fullness that deserves protection and preservation. By upsetting the social design and idealisations of georgic and pastoral conventions, *The Desert Survival Series* and its digital support not only constitute a form of eco-poetic action attempting to alleviate the suffering of cross-border migrants; it also effectively disrupts the reading habits of seasoned readers of poetry, encouraging them to confront their own complicity with the larger systems and structures that cause migrants to take up the often lethal journey through the desert.

The experience of destabilisation and the negotiation of overlapping maze-like realities are equally evoked in the very different material discussed in Jessica Maufort’s article, namely a Maōri novel whose themes and poetics the author examines through the eclectic lens of what she calls the “labyrinthine compost.” In her essay, “The Postcolonial Eco-poetics of Patricia Grace’s *Tu: The Compost and the Labyrinth*,” the struggles of indigenous men enlisted in the 28th Maōri Infantry Battalion on the Italian front during the Second World War are seen as a particularly resonant instance of the human tendency to try to make order out of interlocking forms of chaos. In the novel, the horrors of war simultaneously upset recognisable patterns of organisation in the physical landscape, personal mindscape, and the scaping of History. In her postcolonial

reading of *Tu*, Maufort presents to us a layered fiction whose juxtaposed plotlines, narrative voices, and temporalities she interprets as unfolding akin to the spiral-like structural dynamics of the fern. Maufort allies this spiralling—through which non-anthropocentric Maōri cosmology has traditionally read order and chaos in non-dualistic terms—with the *poietic* potentialities of two other, Western and indeed explicitly European motifs: the spatial and mobilising dynamics of the labyrinth, on the one hand, and the biological, trans-species, and recycling dynamics of the compost, on the other. Privileging neither randomness nor design as emancipating forces, but maintaining the two principles of organisation in tension, Maufort highlights how the interacting dynamics of the maze, compost, and spiral in Grace’s novel guide both protagonists and readers through a processual decoding of reality that makes them oscillate between unexpected forms of order and chaos. As a result, colonial (pre)conceptions regarding “wildness” and “civilisation” become destabilised and can only be recast.

Clara Breteau, author of the only contribution in French to this Special Focus section, also challenges preconceptions about the “wild” and the “civilised,” about the untamed and the controlled. However, this time randomness and design are dwelt upon outside the sphere of literature and of the printed word altogether. In her essay playfully entitled “**POÈME** : la **PO**ïesis à l’Ère de la **MÉ**tamorphose,” Breteau focuses on very concrete forms combining anarchy and order, structure and accident. Indeed, from May to September 2015, Breteau engaged in fieldwork study of alternative, ecologically sustainable and often communal dwellings. In particular, she documented the forms of interior design and architecture—or as Breteau puts it, “anarchitecture”—that such countercultural modes of re-inhabitation of the living biosphere entail in their reconnection of the eco-poetic with *poiesis*, taking seriously the latter’s primordial, energetic sense of a force of making and creative transformation leading to emergence. Before discussing individual study cases of Tim Ingold’s “hylemorphic” design (213) in sustainable architecture and artefacts, Breteau’s essay itself reconnects *poiesis* and the eco-poetic: indeed, the article opens with a detailed historical survey of the lexical meaning of the term *poiesis* outside literature, demonstrating how its connotations of travail—in the sense of struggle or effort toward change—and processual transformation have evolved over time. Richly illustrated by photographs, the essay then moves on to document individual examples of house-making and fashioning of architectural/artistic objects that wilfully open themselves to the *poiesis* at work in the non-human agencies of the plants and soil mostly. These entangled human and non-human agencies are shown to proliferate in unpredictable directions and to obey different laws of time than those of strictly utilitarian productivity. Breteau’s article thus illuminates eco-poetics as an organic process of hybridisation between chance and intent, perturbation and pattern, contingency and necessity, and free and controlled emergence. In so doing, the closing contribution strikingly examines, one more time, the grey zone of interaction between randomness and design that the other articles in the variegated, aleatory-style mosaic on offer in this Special Focus section also bring to light, each in their own individual fashion: neither pure randomness nor pure design do exist, be it in the material world or in the realm of eco-poetics; and instead of us falsely insisting on a strict line of demarcation between the two, it is their enmeshment that



should engage our attention. Like Hix's opening contribution, which returns us to the conceptual fundamentals of ecology and eco-poetics, Breteau's final essay leads us back to the fundamentals of *poiesis* as an embodied eco-poetics, thereby reminding us that "Poetry is thinking with your skin" (Ferlinghetti 17).

## Acknowledgements

Curating a thematic section requires the help, encouragement, and contribution of many people. As guest-editors, Franca Bellarsi and Judith Rauscher would like to warmly thank the entire *Ecozon@* Board and editorial team for their guidance, patience, and invaluable technical assistance. The guest-editors also have a huge debt toward the external peer reviewers, many of whom generously gave of the time they did not have in the first place. Without scholars accepting to share their knowledge, there would of course be no thematic section, and Franca and Judith would also like to thank their contributors for continuing to work and exchange with them over the weeks in unshakeably good spirits.

At the more personal level, Franca would also like to acknowledge Chad Weidner: their ongoing eco-poetic conversation and collaboration since 2014 continue to inspire and have certainly helped her to think further and better about "randomness" and "design."

Finally, the guest-editors wish to thank one another for the enriching intellectual cross-fertilisation that was their gift to each other over all these past months. Their collaboration once more vindicates William Blake's belief that "Without Contraries is no progression."

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