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## **'A fluctuating relationship with nature:' Tom Raworth's ecopoetics**

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### **Author Bio**

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### **Abstract**

Ecopoetics may not be the most obvious frame within which to read Tom Raworth's work, since his poetry seems not to be overtly interested in environmentalism or even in 'nature' more generally. However, this paper demonstrates that his poetry can productively be read as articulating an ecopoetics. It primarily focuses on a single poem, 'Survival'(1994), to show how Raworth's engagement with the politics of spatial organisation and inhabitation, his characteristic poetic practice of indeterminate linkage, and his meta-poetic critique of aesthetic traditions and tropes puts his work in fruitful dialogue with current ecopoetic concerns.

An early section of Tom Raworth's poem 'Survival' conjures a scenario in which

expression becomes sublimated  
beyond discursive thought  
making it possible to promise

a fluctuating relationship with nature  
from an unusual use of language<sup>1</sup>

Is this a meta-poetic statement of poetic ambition? Or is Raworth being ironic; do these lines merely a parody a particular kind of poetic attitude about which the speaker is sceptical? Either way, what exactly is meant by 'nature'? And why does the 'fluctuating relationship' beckon with such potential?

Furthermore, given the long and not unproblematic history of the sublime in 'nature writing', what are we to make of a drive toward 'sublimated' articulation conducted through 'an unusual use of language'? This question is complicated further by the fact that this aspiration is conveyed in language that *does* swerve into a 'discursive' mode, even if only momentarily. Given the high levels of indeterminacy that characterise Raworth's work, such questions are unlikely to find any definitive answers. However, they do provoke a further area of investigation: in what ways can Raworth's poetry be read in 'relationship with nature' and what might be gained from such a reading?

Raworth may not be the first poet who comes to mind in connection with ecopoetics, and ecopoetics is probably not the most obvious frame within which to read his work. His poetry does not express an overt interest in 'green' issues, and nor does it seem particularly to concern itself with 'nature' or rural spaces. However, as many recent discussions in this field have demonstrated, to think of ecopoetics only in terms of work that is explicitly environmentalist or focused primarily on 'natural' environments is limiting. To assume that only certain kinds of poetry labelled 'ecopoetry' or 'nature poetry' are relevant to ecocritical endeavours is an act of fence building which ignores one of the basic tenets of ecological thinking, that of interconnection. Ecological matters are not separable from other social, political, cultural and even aesthetic concerns, even if we are not always accustomed to recognising the links. Jonathan Skinner has argued that rather than focusing on a certain 'kind' of writing, ecopoetics can be defined as 'an array of practices converging on the *oikos*, the planet earth that is the only home our species currently knows'.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Skinner, Linda Russo proposes that the ecopoetic be understood as 'human language entrenched with the materiality and relationships that subsume our shared "environment"'.<sup>3</sup>

Raworth's poetry is undoubtedly interested, both formally and conceptually, in interconnectedness and in the politics and ethics of inhabiting 'our shared "environment"'. Indeed, reading Raworth in this way may even cast new light on his work and its ethico-political potentials, as well as contributing to the critical task of enlarging the scope of ecopoetics. Focusing predominantly on a single poem, 'Survival', I will show that Raworth investigates questions of inhabitation, ontology and poetic form that are highly pertinent to current ecological concerns and ecocritical debates. 'Survival,' initially published in *Survival* (1994) and later in *Clean and Well Lit* (1996), is a poem of the 1990s, a time when, following the 'greenhouse summer' of 1988, discourses of climate change and other kinds of environmental threat began to 'penetrate[] more deeply into popular culture in the West' because of shifts in policy and media attention.<sup>4</sup> Since Raworth's poetry, as has been frequently noted, is so highly attuned to popular culture and public discourse, it is my sense that his work increasingly registers and reflects upon a changing environmental consciousness from the late 1980s onwards. Although no one Raworth poem can be taken as representative of his work at any particular time, I do want to suggest that an ecologically-oriented reading of 'Survival' might begin to reveal something of the wider ecopoetics of Raworth's work.

### **The *Oikos* of Late Capitalism**

It has become fairly common to note the temporal effects of Raworth's poetry (and most notably its speediness).<sup>5</sup> However, few commentators have dwelt for very long on its spatial effects. Raworth's poems characteristically evoke, or even produce, an (albeit constantly shifting) sense of place and space. In 'Survival', a poem that takes the twelve-line form that Raworth adopted and worked with in the late eighties and early nineties, each of the stanzas move through distinct landscapes, environments and habitats in ways that raise questions about constructions of space and inhabitation. 'Survival' begins

between sounds of different  
but familiar idioms  
bonfires of rubber tyres  
underline the arrival

of a population  
allowed to attend  
cautiously: worried  
spectators gather  
projecting their image  
as well as dance techniques (459)

What is evoked here is no distinct place locatable on a map. But several of the images (the 'bonfires of rubber tyres', the nomadic and externally-controlled 'population' and 'worried spectators') contribute to a sense of location that is provisional, transient, precarious and constructed on the margins of culture, in a liminal 'between'. This trope of provisional and contingent spaces frequently recurs; the poem as a whole moves through an array of 'environments' ranging in scale from the cosmic 'black hole/ in ordinary flat space'(460), to domestic and communal places seemingly unsettled by some kind of catastrophe, to a city space 'shrouding all of us'(462), to the national space of 'despair on this little island'(464), to 'no place to stand'(468) in the final line. 'Survival' is a poem of place-as-precarity.

As John Barrell argues, Raworth's poetry 'is saturated in the discourses of politics: everywhere there are voices which express the fragments of an anger against, in particular, the organised injustices of international capitalism'.<sup>6</sup> Such critique of this structural injustice is ubiquitously palpable in the contingent and unstable spatialities of Raworth's poetry; the very precarity of these spaces typifies the *oikos* of late capitalism. As many contemporary green thinkers emphasise, *oikos*, the ancient Greek word for 'household' or dwelling place, is the shared root for both 'ecology' and 'economy',<sup>7</sup> and this brings into focus the intertwining of these factors in environment making. Sociologist Jason W. Moore, reprising a key tenet of radical geographical thought and recasting it in relation to ecological questions remarks that 'all social relations are spatial relations, relations within the web of life'.<sup>8</sup> As Henri Lefebvre influentially argued, capitalism does not just operate within space, it *produces* it, and that production, Moore

contends, is inextricably bound up with a dialectic in which capitalism deploys nature, and nature is transformed through capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

This process is often tangible in the spaces through which Raworth's poem moves:

wind instruments signalled  
over more distant fiefs  
evaded by using unusually large  
miners and mere cannon-fodder  
to provide meat somewhat at a loss (464)

This section of the poem sketches a landscape of violent conflict that seems at once archaic and post-industrial. The single word 'fiefs' here signals a feudal relation between land, ownership, labour and power. The very idea that land can be apportioned, owned and ascribed value forms the basis of 'primitive accumulation', Marx's term for the acquisition of land-as-property through various kinds of violence, which forms the 'pre-history of capital'.<sup>10</sup> Marx writes of the ways in which primitive accumulation 'incorporated the soil into capital', so that the very biological resources of the land itself are commodified and begin to circulate as a form of value.<sup>11</sup> Such processes are at the origin of capitalism as '*a way of organizing nature*'.<sup>12</sup>

However, it is not only land but also labour that is present as exploitable natural resource in Raworth's lines; 'unusually large/ miners and mere cannon-fodder' are deployed in this conflict-ridden scenario. Their role appears to be both to 'evade' the 'wind instruments' which play a part in the staking out of property and the assertion of power, and, more sinisterly, to 'provide meat' – raw, material sustenance. The phrase 'somewhat at a loss' ascribes relative sets of values to these functions (i.e. labour power is more valuable than the organic entity as raw matter) inscribing these labouring bodies into a system of profit and loss. Given the reference to 'wind instruments' above, it is possible to read 'miners' as a reference to Australian noisy miner birds whose aggressive territorial behaviour includes staking out their patch via a system of calls. But 'miners', and the association with 'mere cannon-fodder' cannot help, in the early 1990s British context which informs

this poem, but allude to the circumstances and legacies of the Miner's Strike of the previous decade, when the Thatcher government began to close coal mines and make redundancies. In a key moment in the history of neoliberalism in Britain, the Thatcher government's victory over the miners, in spite of their lengthy and infamous strike in 1984-5, paved the way for a radical weakening of union powers, increasing deregulation of the labour market, and the opening up of fossil fuel and other markets to global competition and investment.<sup>13</sup> In this scenario, miners are indeed 'mere cannon-fodder', sacrificed to a wider neoliberal agenda. Moreover, in numerous ways they function within a mode of exploiting nature which operates around extraction and waste; in 1980s Britain the miners' labour became expendable 'waste' at a moment at which capitalism as '*a way of organizing nature*' was being reconfigured on a global scale.

The objection might be raised, of course, that in Raworth's poems referentiality cannot and should not be taken for granted, and that fragmented allusions to particular spaces or scenes cannot be assumed to refer to real-world environments of any kind. As Raworth's account of his own composition process indicates, much of his poetic material is gleaned from other texts, conversations and various media representations encountered in the poet's daily life.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, a quick internet search reveals that the lines analysed above, and indeed much of the stanza from which they come, consists of tweaked phrases lifted from a book called *The Mongol Warlords* by David Nicholle, published in 1990, and which Raworth may well have been reading, or even just browsing, when he wrote 'Survival'. But the stanza in question is no more 'about' the pre-capitalist feudal wars of domination carried out by Genghis Khan and his heirs than it is 'about' any other specific time or place. In Raworth's poem, reworked and repurposed 'found materials' are woven among 'different/ but familiar idioms' and transformed in the process. Pound's ideogrammic method and Olson's open field poetics are certainly precursors for such a method. However, as Robert Sheppard observes, Raworth's collage techniques of 'creative linkage' embrace a much higher degree of indeterminacy in forming connectives, and 'impel [readerly] collaboration' to a greater extent than these prior models.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in the example that I have been discussing, the source material is more thoroughly stripped of historical

referents than Pound's or Olson's collaged archival materials. It is then recomposed in ways that invite re-contextualisation within an array of other possible historical and social milieus. Furthermore, Raworth exploits errors or happy accidents such as the misspelling 'miners' in his source (presumably intended as 'minors') whose semantic potentials are transformed within a new set of possible contexts.

Raworth's techniques of textual appropriation and recombination, along with his embrace of error and indeterminacy, raise questions about this poetry's 'relationship with nature' that intersect with long-running ecocritical debates related to referentiality. Early ecocriticism's reactions against poststructuralist and postmodernist emphases on textuality and bracketing of the referential world led to a privileging of realist or mimetic literary modes in the field. Leonard M. Scigaj's vision of 'sustainable poetry, a poetry that does not allow the degradation of ecosystems through an inattention to the referential base of all language'<sup>16</sup> is a much-cited example of this tendency. For Scigaj, poetic and critical insistence upon the 'referential base of all language' cultivates ethical forms of attention to the ecological basis of our world. '[A]n obsessive focus on language in our literary creations', on the other hand not only detracts from real-world issues of ecological crisis, but goes so far as to 'reduce them to nonexistence'.<sup>17</sup> However, critics working with more nuanced models of language have vigorously questioned the mimetic assumptions of such a position. Timothy Morton's critique of 'ecomimesis' for example, interrogates the privileging of writing which appears to transparently offer an unmediated experiential immersion in 'nature'. Morton argues that even while this mode of writing claims to collapse the distinction between language and the immediacy of the natural world, its very positing of a reality beyond the page perpetuates a 'logic of reification': '[b]y setting up nature as an object "over there" – a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact – [nature writing] re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish'.<sup>18</sup> Scott Knickerbocker, meanwhile, proposes an understanding of ecopoetic language which moves beyond mimesis, and which he calls 'sensuous poesis'. Undoing 'simple oppositions between humans and nature' 'sensuous poesis operates from the assumption that humans (and their tools, including language) are both distinct and inseparable



from the rest of nature'.<sup>19</sup> This is a mode of writing which 'embrace[s] artifice... as a way to relate meaningfully to the natural world'.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars working in fields beyond the literary have also engaged with related questions. According to sociologist Bronislaw Szerszynski,

[t]he persistence of unsustainability is due not simply to the ignorance or duplicity of individuals, or even to the mere logic of the capitalist system, but also to a *crisis in political meaning* in which we are all implicated... [T]he solution... is not to be found in a simple restoration of political language's reference to a reality outside language, as if language is a flapping sail that can simply be re-secured to its mast.<sup>21</sup>  
(italics in original)

Szerszynski advocates an 'ironic ecology' which draws on the resources of cultural and aesthetic modernism. Characteristics of 'ironic ecology' would include: recognition of inevitable failure, error, aporia, absurdity and the limitations of human knowledge; reflexivity about normative claims and logics, and even about its own stance; representational practices that provoke readerly participation in the production of meanings.<sup>22</sup> The value of irony, Szerszynski suggests, is that it cultivates a critical distance from normative public language, while at the same time recognizing that one cannot completely stand outside of a shared world of meanings and thought.

In its multiple appropriations and redeployments of public language, its (often indeterminately) ironic stance, and its methods of eliciting readerly collaboration, Raworth's poetry is clearly much closer to Szerszynski's 'ironic ecology' than to Scigaj's 'sustainable poetry'. Rather than referring to an external reality, Raworth's poetic mode models and reflects upon complex entanglements of collective language and modes of inhabiting. In the example involving 'miners' and 'cannon fodder' discussed above, for example, Raworth's methods of textual appropriation and 'creative linkage' allow us to trace 'familiar idioms' of environment-making according to configurations of ownership, violence, competition, the delineation and exploitation of 'resources' or the 'domination of nature'. This is one of the ways in which his poetic language might be seen as 'language entrenched with the materiality

and relationships that subsume our shared “environment”<sup>23</sup>. We make environments through our collective modes of inhabiting them (including language practices, perception and cognition), and it is these modes of inhabiting, rather than specific places as such, that Raworth’s poetry renders tangible in its glimpses of fraught, violent, conflict-ridden landscapes of precarious and contingent life within the *oikos* of late capitalism. It is not that this work nostalgically mourns the passing of more stable senses of place and belonging. Rather, it registers an intertwining of economic, social and ecological processes, and investigates the structural violence of capitalist constructions of space-as-property and nature-as-resource.

### Everything is interconnected

However, this poetry also tests out other kinds of orientation toward the material world. Again, it is not that Raworth simply creates visions of alternative utopian spaces. Rather, his work investigates possibilities for reworking conceptual, perceptual and experiential understandings of ‘relationship with nature’ and it does so most particularly through his characteristic poetic techniques. I want to propose that we might detect parallels between Raworth’s poetic forms and some recent theorisations of interconnectivity in contemporary ecological thought. Jason W. Moore argues for the necessity of a ‘radical shift’ in how we conceptualise nature or environment,

a transition from nature as resource to nature as matrix. Nature can be neither destroyed nor saved, only reconfigured in ways that are more or less emancipatory, more or less oppressive. But take note: our terms ‘emancipatory’ and ‘oppressive’ are offered not from the standpoint of humans narrowly, but through *oikeios*, the pulsing and renewing dialectic of humans and the rest of nature.<sup>24</sup>

Moore’s use of the term *oikeios* (as pertaining to a relation between inhabitant and habitat, rather than home as an objective external ‘place’) reaches beyond the notion of *oikos* as a surrounding medium and instead emphasises

entanglement and mutual coproduction between human and non-human forms of life and non-life.

Language is also, and importantly, part of the *oikeios*. Raworth's poem highlights this in its gesture toward a 'fluctuating relationship with nature/ from an unusual use of language' (459). Not only does the term 'fluctuating' intimate a process of flux and dialectical exchange, but Raworth's poetic techniques, both in the poem 'Survival' and elsewhere in his work, frequently model something like Moore's notion of *oikeios*. Perhaps the most obvious of these techniques is the 'creative linkage' that I have already begun to discuss, which occurs at different scales in Raworth's poem, not only between lines but also between its distinct twelve-line sections. As commentators have frequently observed, each line of a Raworth poem operates both as a distinct unit and in (ambiguous) syntactic and semantic relation with preceding and subsequent lines.<sup>25</sup> This observation can also be scaled up to describe the relations between Raworth's twelve-line sections in 'Survival', each of which is distinct in evoking a different scene, discourse, set of associations or register but at the same time is yoked to the next (and previous sections) through enjambment and semantic association. Consider the following example, which transitions between the end of one stanza and the next:

strange things that make existence  
these lost parts of the city  
shrouding all of us

night darkening around us  
the track is not easy to find  
a hazy line  
repeating its own features

(462)

The first three lines suggest and also formally enact an intimate but ambiguous ontological connection between the city and a collective 'us.' The repetition of 'us' (though not necessarily the same 'us'), the parallel phrasing and the semantic associations between 'shrouding' and 'night darkening' tie

the stanzas together, as do the less localised tropes of hiddenness that resonate across both sections. In this example, Raworth's radically enjambed and indeterminately yoked images and phrasal constructions both evoke and model a sense of environment not as externalised backdrop to human action but as intimately, materially and ontologically intermeshed in a set of interrelations that constitutes the *oikeios*.

Raworth's characteristic techniques formally embed the basic ecological insight that 'everything is interconnected'. But whereas in ecological discourse this phrase – now almost throwaway in its obviousness – intends to convey how ecosystems are structured on material level, the interconnectedness of a Raworth poem does something slightly different. I have already signalled caution about mimetic assumptions, both in relation to Raworth's work and in ecopoetics more broadly, and it is important not to read this formal interconnectedness as straightforwardly imitative of the fundamental dynamics of the material world. Instead, the kinds of linkage performed in a poem like 'Survival' might be read as formally enacted reflections upon the implications of conceptual, epistemic and perceptual models of ecological interconnectedness.<sup>26</sup> In his book *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton asks what it might mean to fully embed the insight of interconnectedness into our thinking and ways of being in the world. Although 'everything is interconnected' has become something of a cliché, according to Morton 'the ecological thought' is 'the shadow of an idea not yet fully thought'.<sup>27</sup> If 'ecological' thinking is still falling back on ideas of 'environment' or 'nature' as an externality; a set of resources to be (even 'sustainably') used; a place that subjects dwell in; a system that can be objectively studied; or even as something that needs saving, then this is not truly ecological thinking. According to Morton, the ethically urgent task of the ecological thought calls for cognitive structures, vocabularies and indeed ways of being that we have not yet developed.

Through an 'unusual use of language', a poem like 'Survival' explores what it might feel like to think the incipient ecological thought. Interconnectedness in Raworth's poem is not celebrated as happy holism but rather involves contingent and indeterminate relations such as 'strange things that make existence/ these lost parts of the city.' Are 'strange things' and 'lost

parts' equivalent here, or just contiguous? Is there causality or merely coincidence between 'night darkening around us' and 'the track is not easy to find'? What are we to make of contradictory articulations such as 'its brilliant openings/ caged in their scorn' (462)? Everything is potentially implicated in everything else, and nothing is external or entirely separable from the meshed structures and images that make up a Raworth poem. It is not only the joinings and disjointings of Raworth's distinctive 'creative linkage' that are worth thinking about in ecological terms, but also other related formal characteristics, such as grammatical structures that are often lacking a subject or predicate, and syntax that frequently links agents and actions only tenuously, or otherwise in multiple directions.

As Joan Retallack's discussion of poems from his collection *Meadow* indicates, Raworth's poetry constructs 'geometries of attention' that are 'dissipative:'

One of several geometries of attention suggested by this poetics resembles that invited by the form of any meadow, linguistic or botanical: absent a footpath, there's no single logic of entry or departure. One can frame any section and notice more and more eco-detail.<sup>28</sup>

Although she is not explicitly making this connection here, Retallack's analogy of the meadow correlates to a 'dissipative' attentionality of the 'open field' of American post-war poetics to which Raworth is heir, and which he encountered in various ways through his extensive dialogues with Ed Dorn, Robert Creeley and others from the early 1960s onwards. What Retallack's notion of a 'geometry of attention' highlights, however, is the ethical, or rather, to use her terminology, 'poethical'<sup>29</sup> stakes of such aesthetic models. In its famous formulation by Olson, 'open field' poetics contains the seeds of a poethics which has implications for ecopoetics:<sup>30</sup>

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature

of nature... and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man himself is an object... the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use.<sup>31</sup>

The decentering of the ego is of course one of the most familiar and portable principles of open field poetics. But viewed from an ecological perspective, composition by field connects questions of poetic form to an ethical stance that profoundly unsettles the subject's separation from a world of material things. In this vision the lyric subject, and indeed the human subject more broadly, exists in non-hierarchical relation as an object among other objects. It is this way of thinking about the material world in terms of radical, complex interconnectedness of particulars that makes open field poetics so relevant to contemporary ecopoetics. As Miriam Nichols puts it:

Method is ethos: When the human actor behaves so as to articulate more, rather than less, of his or her ground, that actor increases the creative potential of the chaosmos. The assumption [of open field poetics] is that figure and ground emerge coevally, and that it is a value of field poetics that the articulation be as complex as possible. In ecological language, this would mean an affirmation of diversity.<sup>32</sup>

I think that we can productively read Raworth as a contemporary poet who takes on and reworks this legacy of the open field. His poetry's 'dissipative' structures complexly intertwine figure and ground in ways that thwart hierarchical attentionality. Although Nichols is right to highlight the ecological implications here, in my sense that this method-as-ethos has potentials that go somewhat further than 'an affirmation of diversity.' The open-field's 'geometry of attention' cultivates a politics of noticing that, by bringing the ground into the foreground, enacts complex forms of what Karen Barad calls 'intra-action'.

As Barad puts it,

in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the 'distinct' agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute sense.<sup>33</sup>

The ways in which Raworth's poem embodies such a sensibility might best be explored by examining an entire 12-line section:

feelings belonged to the past  
his stomach churned  
the breeze blew  
through thick underbrush  
following him around  
out onto the highway  
and grinned  
flailing about  
not to touch his cold flesh  
you could smell it  
from deep in the earth  
watching the smoke crawl  
from his straining lungs  
with its icy purity (465)

The ambiguous connections between images of human and non-human processes and agencies here go beyond pathetic fallacy or objective correlative. Precise relations between phrases, agents and actions, subjects and objects are impossible to pin down, and syntactical constructions are radically porous. For example, 'breeze' in these lines does not operate simply as an objective correlative in which the 'object' or non-human entity tends to be subordinated to and subsumed by human emotion, even as it is positioned as exterior to the subject. Instead, because in Raworth's poem everything is enjambed, 'feelings', the churning stomach and 'breeze' are yoked together

in constructions that render entities and processes as materially connected and mutually causal. Furthermore, in the lines that follow, the breeze seems to take on agency, 'following him around', and syntax suggests that it is the breeze or else 'his stomach' that grins and flails about, rather than the human subject. It is unclear whether the 'he' in this stanza is the same 'he' throughout; in any case, the corporeal being here is rendered so porous and so multiply permeated by the non-human animate world that any notion of a distinct human subject becomes untenable. As the first line obliquely suggests, 'the lyrical interference of the [Romantic] individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul'<sup>34</sup> is superseded by more complex and 'intra-active' configurations of agency, subjectivity, environment, figure and ground.

Moments such as these in Raworth's poetry echo Stacy Alaimo's theorisation of trans-corporeality. As she explains, 'imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"'.<sup>35</sup> Recognition of this porousness and interdependence, she contends, 'makes it imperative that we be accountable for our practices' and can form the basis of an environmental ethics.<sup>36</sup> 'Practices,' of course, involve an array of, often entangled, material, imaginative and aesthetic praxis. Raworth's poetry negotiates interconnectivity, porous inter-subjectivities, dispersed agencies and ambiguous dependencies. In doing so, it thematically and formally investigates what a 'relationship with nature' might mean when 'nature' cannot be ethically or ontologically considered either as resource, as background for human action or as external to human corporeal being.

### Rewriting Nature

If, as I have suggested, we can read Raworth's poetry as investigating the possibilities for 'a relationship with nature' in which the very concept of 'nature' needs to be rethought, then we can also read this work as staging an intervention into the tropes and traditions of 'nature writing'. In a rare consideration of Raworth's use of nature imagery, Brian Reed notes that in 'West Wind', a poem of the early 1980s, 'pastoral interludes' represent a momentary desire to 'escape the agony and mire of contemporary life' to an



enduring space of nature outside history.<sup>37</sup> While Reed's point is compelling with respect to 'West Wind', later poems such as those collected in *Clean and Well Lit* are more circumspect about the lure of the pastoral. 'Rainbow 2', for example, opens with the image of a 'valley where making/ remains a realm of mystery/ cut off from time'(468). From this highly self-conscious allusion to the pastoral follows a series of other constructions in which the 'natural' is rendered fraught; for example, 'years later small sharp/ glimpses of horizon lines/ through apple branches'(469) both temporalises and fragments the rural scene. In 'Name Unknown,' the pastoral is transformed into 'bare space/ with neither flower nor picture/ sunlight glows/ through a half-empty peanut butter jar'(498). Nature in these poems no longer appears, even momentarily, as unmediated space outside history. There is no escape into the pastoral, no fantasy of a space beyond history, no 'away' to which to flee.

Like these poems, 'Survival' never goes far enough – or dwells for long enough – in a mode that could be comfortably labeled as pastoral, and nor is any 'natural' image permitted to appear naturalised. Instead, the poem engages with and reflects upon tropes of writing 'nature'. As Peter Middleton has argued, from early on in his career Raworth has struck up dialogues with 'modes of writing used by other poets', but from within his poetry itself rather than via commentaries and interviews.<sup>38</sup> This poetry, says Middleton, 'reads its own and others' lines metapoetically as critique of poetics and politics, and always carries material traces of ready-made texts within itself'.<sup>39</sup> Middleton aptly focuses on 'modes' associated with poets whose legacies are fresh and influential for Raworth, such as Robert Creeley, Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara. But his poetry also casts its net much more widely. The following lines from 'Survival' carry 'material traces' of some particularly familiar moments in the history of modern poetry:

down in the grasses  
silent, leaning forward (460)

There is an allusion here to a long tradition of poetic meditations on 'grasses', which frequently function as a trope for a speaker's immersion in nature. But much more immediately present are specific echoes of the famous lines of

*Leaves of Grass*, 'I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass. / My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air'.<sup>40</sup> In Whitman's poem, observing the grass is a meditative moment that brings the song of the self into being, as emphasized by the parallel between the spear of grass and the poet's tongue, both formed from the very stuff of the American landscape. So too, it is hard not to detect in Raworth's lines whispers of the singing grass of Eliot's *The Waste Land* which can also be read as an allusion to – and inversion of – Whitman's image, since Whitman's 'summer grass' implies fecundity and Eliot's 'dry grass'<sup>41</sup> aridity. Furthermore, in Whitman it is the poet who comes to voice, whereas in Eliot it is the grass itself that sings. Raworth's lines perform a further reworking and reversal in that it is silence (made even more emphatic by the unusual comma following 'silent'), not singing, that emerges from an encounter with grasses.

As Middleton points out, Raworth's poems perform a 'silent critique' of the poetic legacies of his time; as against the vociferous and confident gestures of various of his predecessors, his poems often 'enact their own lack of legitimacy and their unease about the uses to which they might be put'.<sup>42</sup> It is in this sense that 'Survival' both silently 'speaks back' to its precursors, restlessly reflecting upon prior modes of writing 'nature' and their legacies. After alluding to and inverting the singing selves and grasses of Whitman and Eliot, Raworth's poem continues:

each one of them accomplished  
through the narrative  
accustomed words fall  
easily into dreams (460)

What is highlighted here is the constitutive power of 'the narrative' or 'accustomed words.' Exactly who or what is being 'accomplished' in this way though is uncertain, due to the grammatical ambiguity of 'them', which could equally apply to 'the grasses', or to the entity or entities 'down in the grasses'. This radical ambiguity in itself serves to confuse any distinction between environment ('the grasses') and the entity 'in' the environment. In doing so it silently gestures to the very ways in which it is this distinction itself – the gap

or difference between 'nature' and the observing or experiencing self – is so often 'accomplished/ through the narrative' of nature writing, or what Morton calls 'ecomimesis.' Even Whitman and Eliot, who are certainly no conventional nature poets, nevertheless do not move much beyond this trope in their positing of 'grasses' as a backdrop for the poem's central consciousness. Raworth's 'silent critique' consists not only of such unsettling ambiguity, however, but also in the observation that 'accustomed words fall/ easily into dreams.' Dreams rework, reorder and make new and strange kinds of meanings out of even the most routine language or imagery. Even within the sorts of familiar formulations of 'nature' to which Raworth's poem explicitly alludes, then, such reworkings might open 'various/ doors filling the apertures/ of tradition'(460), although they will not offer confident, fully formed alternatives.

Without misreading Raworth as an 'ecopoet' with an avowed environmentalist agenda, it is nevertheless evident that his work does have vital relevance to discussions of ecopoetics. My exploration of the ecopoetics of 'Survival' has indicated how Raworth's work makes tangible the meshed forms of social and environmental injustice embedded within the *oikos* of late capitalism. But formally and conceptually, it also explores possibilities for alternative modes of 'relationship with nature'. Although 'nature' is at first glance a term used fairly unflinchingly in this poem, Raworth's characteristic poetic techniques do not render nature or environment as objective externalities but as a mesh of interconnected co-dependencies and co-emergences. This work also meta-poetically critiques familiar tropes of nature writing, and reconfigures their components in ways that both work within and stretch beyond such traditions. And yet each of these aspects of the poetry remains resolutely indeterminate in terms of their ecopoetic aspirations. I began this essay by signalling an uncertainty about whether 'Survival' meta-poetically articulates an ecopoetic ambition or an ironic stance toward such an aspiration. The answer has to be, of course, that it does both. Even if Raworth's work can be read as gesturing toward incipient new modes of 'relationship with nature', it also performs an 'ironic ecology' in Szerszynski's sense, in that it constantly articulates failure, scepticism, uncertainty about its own stance and the impossibility of entirely

transcending the very structures it critiques. If this leaves us in the end, as 'Survival' does, 'with no place to stand'(468) eco-poetically, then it might, at least, generate new kinds of question to ask.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Raworth, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2003), 459—469 (p. 459). Hereafter, this collection cited via in-text references.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Skinner, 'Ecopoetics', *Jacket 2* <http://jacket2.org/commentary/jonathan-skinner>

<sup>3</sup> Linda Russo, 'Writing Within: Notes on Ecopoetics as Spatial Practice', *How2*, 3:2 (2008) [https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/ecopoetics/essays/russo.html](https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/essays/russo.html)

<sup>4</sup> Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, John Barrell, 'Subject and Sentence: The Poetry of Tom Raworth', *Critical Inquiry*, 17: 2 (1991), 393, 403; Andrea Brady, 'Tom Raworth: Poetry and Public Pleasure', in *Poetry and Public Language*, ed. by Anthony Caeshu and Tony Lopez (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), 25—36 (p. 28); Brian Reed, 'Carry on, England: Tom Raworth's "West Wind," Intuition, and Neo-Avant-Garde Poetics', *Contemporary Literature*, 47: 2 (2006), 177.

<sup>6</sup> Barrell, 'Subject and Sentence', 409.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume I (London: Penguin, [1867] 1990), 873, 875.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 895.

<sup>12</sup> Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* \* (page refs???)

<sup>14</sup> Tom Raworth, 'A Letter to Martin Stannard', in *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth*, ed by Nate Dorward (Willowdale, Ontario: The Gig, 2003), 204—216.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950—2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 188.

<sup>16</sup> Leonard M. Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* (Lexington, Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 132, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst and Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'The Post-Ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure', *Environmental Politics*, 16:2, 338.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 350—352.

<sup>23</sup> Russo, 'Writing Within'

<sup>24</sup> Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 48-49.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Barrell, 'Subject and Sentence', pp. 394—395, 403; Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying*, pp. 173—174;

<sup>26</sup> My thinking on relations between ecological discourse and interconnectedness in poetry has been much aided by reading sections of Ros Ambler-Alderman's PhD thesis 'Poetry on the Edge of Chaos: the "ecosystem" and the "ecotext"' (Southampton University, not yet submitted).

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Joan Retallack, 'Geometries of a Meadow', in *Removed for Further Study*, 253—258, (pp. 254, 257).

<sup>29</sup> Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

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<sup>30</sup> Contemporary poets with a more explicitly eco-poetic orientation, such as Jonathan Skinner, Harriet Tarlo, Evelyn Reilly have certainly picked up on this.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' in *Collected Prose*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 247.

<sup>32</sup> Miriam Nichols, *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 270.

<sup>33</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.

<sup>34</sup> Olson, 'Projective Verse', 247.

<sup>35</sup> Stacey Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156. \* check

<sup>37</sup> Reed, 'Carry on, England', 180—81.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Middleton, 'Silent Critique: Tom Raworth's Early Books of Poetry' in *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth*, ed by Nate Dorward (Willowdale, Ontario: The Gig, 2003), 7—30 (p. 11).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Book III: Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass* (kindle e-book edition [1855]) no pagination

<sup>41</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) 51—74, p. 65.

<sup>42</sup> Middleton, 'Silent Critique', 28, 27.