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Collage and ecopoetry in Brian Teare's *Companion Grasses*

Abstract:

The term ecopoetry has been subject to definitional debate since its popularisation by ecocritics in the 1990s. At broadest ecopoetry refers to the intersection of poetry and ecology but what type of poetics best embodies this is still being refined. Early critics framed ecopoetry as opposed to the theory driven textuality of Language poetry and other more experimental poetic post-modernisms. A countermovement has seen the development of ecopoetics that adopt techniques of Language and post-modern experimental poetics while maintaining an ecopoetic focus. This paper considers the use of collage in the work of American poet Brian Teare's collection *Companion Grasses*. It aims to show how collage in *Companion Grasses* acts to unite or synthesise these disparate critical approaches to ecopoetry. The concept of anthropocentrism, or human-centeredness, will be considered as a unifying factor in approaches to ecopoetry and something that Teare's collage poetics is deliberately designed to address. It will also be proposed that Teare's use of collage allows him to reconsider the American transcendentalists, the collection in effect performing a rewriting or redrafting of key texts of American naturism.

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In a recent paper Lynn Keller (2012: 610) makes a persuasive argument for extending the boundaries of what is considered ‘environmentally oriented poetry’ away from the poets and poetry commonly considered by ecocritics, stating that ‘[e]videntially, critics still tend to think of environmental poetry first and foremost as nature poetry’. She highlights that ‘with a few very recent exceptions, poetry associated with linguistic and formal experimentation has rarely been examined through an environmental lens’ (605). Similarly, Joan Retallack in her widely cited essay ‘What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need It?’ frames the need for new ‘radical forms’ of nature poetry because ‘practices that reach out (interrogatively) toward constructive new ways of understanding and being in the world may be our only chance at real instruments of optimism’. This paper examines the poetics of Californian poet Brian Teare (2013) in his fourth collection *Companion Grasses* in light of these calls-to-arms. *Companion Grasses* is particularly relevant to considerations of the ongoing definitional differences in ecopoetics, with Teare’s work bridging the concerns of traditional American naturism and postmodern experimentation.

Early writers in American ecopoetics tend towards developing typologies of poetics grounded in referentiality and context, following on from Laurence Buell’s (1996) influential study of North American nature writing, *The Environmental Imagination*. Buell (1996: 7) frames his ideas of environmental writing around an ethical orientation which respects the environment ‘not merely as a framing device’, presents it as ‘a process rather than as a constant or a given’ where ‘[t]he human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest’. After Buell, and among the first to specifically consider American poetry from an environmental perspective, was Leonard Scigaj (1999: 38). In his volume *Sustainable Poetry: Four Ecopoets* Scigaj develops a typology of sustainable poetry around ‘reaching a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the limits of language’, ‘referring one’s perceptions beyond the printed page to nature, to the referential origin of all language’ and ‘in most cases achieving an atonement or at-one-ment with nature’. Extending Scigaj’s (1999) framework was the first anthology of ecocriticism specifically on North American ecopoetry, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Reader* (Bryson 2002). The editor J. S. Bryson (2002: 6) defines ecopoetry in similar terms around themes of interrelationships of human-and-other-than-human. In each of these three formative texts on American ecopoetry emphasis is placed on recognizing and overcoming anthropocentrism – human-centeredness – through situating the human within a wider planetary network of beings.

To challenge anthropocentrism these texts position language as something which although limited is capable of reaching outside the writer into the world, Keller (2012: 604) stating that ‘[a]s [e]cocritical concerns about real-world environmental degradation have fostered an insistence on nature as something that is phenomenologically real’. Structuralism and poststructuralism are seen as suspect. Scigaj (1999: 29) proposes that ecopoets:

argue the reverse of the poststructural position that all experience is mediated by language. For ecopoets language is an instrument that the poet continually refurbishes to articulate his originary experience in nature—the origin, as Pack asserted, of language.

The lineage of American ecopoetry from this perspective ‘follows the emergence of ecological poetry from the work of Emerson and his circle’ and is positioned away from post-modernist poetry and criticism, particularly Language poetry (Elder 1999: ix).

Emerson and his circle are definitive figures of American transcendentalism. Very briefly, American transcendentalism was based on ‘a monism holding to the unity of the world and God, and the immanence of God in the world’ (Hart & Leininger 2013). It stressed individualism and the ability of the individual to encounter God through engagement with the natural world. Transcendentalists stressed the moral quality of this interaction and the essential good of both man and nature. The ongoing influence of the transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Thoreau, has been highlighted in a positive way by some ecocritics (Buell 1995, Thomson 2002). To others the ongoing legacy of Thoreau is one of anthropocentrism where ‘Thoreau framed our relationship to the environment as a balancing (see: management) act with wilderness and civilisation seen as distinct categories that bring out the best in each other as long as Nature is “rightly read”’ (Darragh 2010: 2). Here humans are conceived as the only ones capable of reading nature. In Skinner’s (2010: 33) treatment of *Walden*, Thoreau is politically suspect connecting ‘the “wild” with inexorable and manifest colonial destiny’. On a broader political note, Magi (2010: 248) critiques John Elder and Robert Finch, editors of the *Norton Book of Nature Writing* for continuing ‘to describe nature writing in North America an act of “exploration,” not conquest... Conceptualizing nature writing in this way fails to articulate the link between the abuse of peoples and the abuse of land and literature’s role in those abuses’. It is within this context that Keller (2012: 611) calls for assessing other types of ecopoetics that ‘that focus less on individual encounters with nature and more on collective modes of inhabiting the earth’ or ‘that consider in complex ways the impact of particular social structures, particular industrial or commercial practices, and such global phenomena as colonialism on the environment’.

Brian Teare’s *Companion Grasses* offers unique insight into the dissonance between work embracing the lineage of the transcendentalists and that which is more critical. Specifically Teare uses the modern and post-modern techniques of collage—the collection together of disparate textual elements into a new work—to reformulate the work of early American nature writers. In his practice Teare writes within an alternative ecopoetics developed in the US over the past decade, tied to the post-modern poetics of Language poetry and the avant-garde, stressing experimentation. Language poetry, now seen more as a loose grouping than a school, emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s defined by political, often Marxist, approaches to language and a suspicion of the dominant ‘natural’ lyrical ‘I’ voice. As Lyn Hejinian (2000: 329) an influential first wave Language poet writes in her seminal *The Language of Inquiry*:

Language poetry called into question several premises which prior definitions of literature assumed...[a] significant component of this canonized world view, of course, was the romantic, unitary, expressive self, the “I” of the lyric poem.

The resulting poetry through a wide variety of techniques emphasizes ‘its writtenness, its literariness’, the poem calling ‘attention to the complexity of its constructedness’ (Heijinian 2000: 329).

In the 21st century there has been a relaxing of tensions between the broad schools of lyrical poetry and experimental poetry (Keller 2012). Yet this is only just starting to filter into the work of ecopoetics. In his introduction to the first issue of *ecopoetics* Jonathon Skinner (2001: 7) highlights the weaknesses of both the traditional Language approach and the traditional environmental approach, stating:

The literature of [the] largely Anglo-American [environmentalist] tradition may be ‘eco’... but it comes up short in “poetics”—demonstrating overall, for a movement whose scientific mantra is “biodiversity,” an astonishing lack of diversity in approaches to culture, to the written and spoken word...The environmental movement stands to be criticized for the extent to which it has protected a fairly received notion of “eco” from the proddings and complications, and enrichments, of an investigative poetics...The avant-gardes of the last decades..., noted for linguistically sophisticated approaches to difficult issues, also stand to be criticized for their overall silence on a comparable approach to environmental questions.

The poetry that appeared throughout the issues of *ecopoetics* often used experimental or Language derived techniques as means of ecopoetic investigation. This is less counter-intuitive than first assumed by early ecocritics of ecopoetry, some critics stressing the similarity of the Language questioning of the subjectivity of the lyric ‘I’ and the emphasis in discussions of ecopoetry on overcoming anthropocentrism (Keller 2015).

Writing on a. rawlings, Keller (2015) states that ‘experimental poetics—in their alternative approaches to poetic subjectivity, emphasis on the materiality of language, and resistance to the conventional regulations of thought encoded in standard syntax and other conventional literary structures—might be helping shift our sense of human/nonhuman relations away from the anthropocentric’. Key here is the ways that more contemporary ecocritics frame ideas of poetic subjectivity and the ‘materiality of language’ in terms of poesis. Jonathon Skinner (2001: 5) defines ecopoetics through poesis:

“Eco” here signals—no more, no less—the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth. “Poetics” is used as *poesis* or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act (nor vice versa). Thus: ecopoetics, a house making.

Poesis offers an underdeveloped link between more traditional ecocriticism of ecopoetry and the more experimental. Namely that through focusing on the physical making of poetry, poesis foregrounds what Skinner (Hume 2014: 760) terms ‘the irreducible presence of the body’ in the world. This overcomes concerns raised about post-structuralism and structuralism through linking the textual artefact to the body and hence to the world. In Teare’s work he practices a poesis of collage, bringing together disparate parts of the wider world in a weave that deemphasizes the human.

Before moving on to a close reading of *Companion Grasses* it is necessary to establish how collage functions in ecopoetry and more broadly in Language writing. Looking at the critical work of Leslie Scalapino (2011) we see clearer the interaction of Language poetry and the American avant-garde with the idea of collage. Scalapino (2011: 216-222) reconstitutes Language poetry to be ecological through a careful renegotiation of the idea of language poetry as requiring an ‘erasure of self’. She (2011: 216) proposes that

[e]rasure of the self (as the intent, and that as negative sense of ‘self’) is not an avant-garde tactic, the history of the avant-garde being to devise tactics which exploded or inundated the barrier between ‘self’ and recognition that it is (we are) of the real.

This leads to a poetry/criticism that is intimately concerned with the world, one which seeks to restore the human to the world not separate it from it. For Scalapino (2011: 5) this is inextricable from formal innovations, especially a reconsideration of how structure works in poetry. She emphasizes a particular collage structure termed ‘paratactic-as-analytic’ which we will also see is present in Teare. Parataxis is the lying side by side of texts or parts of texts without coordinating them into a hierarchy. Collage from this perspective becomes the placing side-by-side of the human and the other-than-human in the form of poetry, where ‘the writing is a “relational state” in which nonhuman perspective is as much a factor as human perspective nor is this anthropomorphic, rather the opposite, an infinite extension of perspective’ (Scalapino 2011: 103). What is ecological here is not so much defined by theme or topic but by the perspective. Ecopoetry/criticism becomes a way of perceiving demonstrated by particular spatial organisations of text.

In many ways this type of collage functions as a way of embodying the longstanding scientific concept of ‘ecotone’, which Christopher Arigo (2008, emphasis in original) repurposes for ecopoetry as:

a biological term used to describe the area between adjacent ecosystems, which often creates an “edge effect,” that is, the actual boundary between different habitats. So, in a sense, an ecotone exists between the edges of ecosystems—it is *on the edge*, just as ecopoetics is on the edge of numerous disciplines.

It is fitting then that while ostensibly pure lyric poetry, Brian Teare’s (2013) volume *Companion Grasses* extends the lyric perspective in an interdisciplinary way into the field of research through poetic experimentation. His work is ‘*on the edge*’ of literary criticism, lyric poetry, experimental poetry, ecology and scientific research. Similarly, his collage method holds these different things together while acknowledging the spaces, the edges, between them.

How the collection functions as intermediary between pure research and pure poetry is evident in the individual compositions and in the overall structure of the text. Teare makes the choice to include a ‘Notes’ section at the conclusion of his text, establishing the collection as a whole textual body, a large scale collage (106-109). He isolates the material incorporated from secondary research sources through use of quotation marks (and sometimes citations) in the poems themselves. Strictly speaking, it is not necessary to include this poetic works cited, its inclusion declares the poetry collection as research project. In a widely cited essay the ecocritic Joan Retallack (2007) defines ecopoetry as

Writing the Ghost Train: Refereed conference papers of the 20th Annual AAWP Conference, 2015

experimental process: ‘The very word ecopoetics may be seen as an experimental instrument that creates a new order of attention to the possibility of a poetics of precise observations and conversational interspecies relations with all contributing to the nature of the form’. Teare’s poetics interact with this idea of experimentation through the textual convention of the works cited while his collage is analogous to ‘conversational’.

Part of Teare’s experimentation is to upset the usual conventions of research. The references given for each poem are arranged alphabetically as they would be in an essay collection, yet the quoted material in most poems is not directly cited or paginated. Readers are given the ability to tell what extra material is included but not the ease of knowing precisely which information unit has come from where. In a less precise writer this could be perceived as other than deliberate, instead the choice of referencing becomes an active part of the creative composition. Teare, resists turning his poems into ‘fact’. This calls into question how textual artefacts such as works cited function in the realm of pure research, removing the veil of scientific objectivity and making us aware of them as human created texts—a key part of an ecopoetic approach and one that is dependent upon a broad strategy of collage.

The ecological imperative for this type of composition is made explicit in Teare’s preface to the notes section where he states that ‘the poems in *Companion Grasses* actively practice what Jed Rasula in *This Compost*...calls “wreading”—a “nosing into the compost library”—what follows is...information about the texts that composed the “ecology of mind” from which the poems emerged’ (106). In *This Compost* Rasula (2002: xii) proposes ‘wreading’ as an ecological method, highlighting his own lack of traditional citations ‘as an exercise in ecological solidarity’ where instead the texts are ‘blended into polyphonic configurations’. Rasula (2002: 9) states that this method is in opposition to anthropocentrism for it deemphasises the authorial role ‘restor[ing] to the poetics at hand that solidarity in anonymity which is the deep issue of planetary time’. In Teare’s foregrounding of ‘wreading’ he directs our attention to poiesis, to what happens off the page. This, Hume (2012: 3 emphasis in the original) says:

highlights the importance of material space and embodied action, and foregrounds the poem as a material-semiotic node that *becomes with* a network of other human and non-human actors.

Teare’s collage embodies this network, using his perceptual faculties to weave together the world with the discourses of literature and science.

Teare’s interaction with the forms of research is not unique in poetry. The use of scientific materials, both content and structure, has formed part of post-modern approaches questioning of textual bodies and of ideas of selves (Retallack 2007). How Teare differs from these approaches is in his use of the same tactics in a lyric, personal poetry of the ‘I’. Joshua Corey (2013: 10) says of collage that ‘there is an inherent and useful tension between the frame-breaking logic of collage and the supposed integrity of the *oikos*, the “home” that ecology seeks to study and economy to manage’. This is true of Teare. How it represents a deeper challenge to anthropocentrism than just a challenge of language is in a deeper understanding of what home might be to Teare. Through his use of I in collage form and his acknowledged phenomenological influences, home is

ecology but also the body as ‘the touching and the touched’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 147). A similar use of the lyric ‘I’ has been noted in Lynn Keller’s (2010) work on second-wave Language poet Juliana Spahr. Keller (2010: 83) proposes the term ‘post-language lyric’ to describe work where the lyric ‘I’ is placed into tension with the political aspects of ecopoetry producing a ‘tension between individual and collective life’. In Teare this is represented through the interaction of the ‘I’ and the collage form and through his repeated imagery of the body. Collage becomes a way of recognizing the limits of the body’s engagement with the world.

Teare’s (2013: 16-17) bodily ecology is apparent from the first poem in the book ‘White graphite (*Limantour Beach*)’ which proceeds in tight enjambed couplets of disjointed images of the sea: ‘the spit’s edge open/ to ocean goes pure// contour.’ While not incorporating any extratextual material, this poem displays many of the key features of Teare’s collage poetics and their linkage to his epistemological and ontological concerns. The title simultaneously embeds the poem in questions of language, ties language intimately to perception and demonstrates how exact meaning cannot be isolated, operating instead in layers. ‘White graphite’ is a type of rock, but graphite is also suggestive of writing. The fact that this is ‘White’ graphite conjures a clear or unviewable writing, one inextricably tied to the natural world. The sub – or secondary – title (*Limantour Beach*) performs a rewriting before we even enter the poem proper. Here it names the place of the poem, in other poems it is used to give the scientific name of a plant or in ‘Transcendental grammar crown’ to direct the poem towards another writer or idea. In each of these uses it is demonstrative of a poet concerned with poesis. The title proper gives us the ‘what’ of the poem, the subtitle the ‘where/how-and-why’ of making. We are directed to read the poem as emerging out of a specific poets’ interaction with a specific place. The poem that follows begins without capitalisation and ends with a movement to ‘elsewhere’ represented in the poem by white space.

White, or negative, space is a core feature and concern in Teare’s work, enclosing his consideration of the gap between perception and language, self and world, matter and thought. Through white space Teare foregrounds the materiality of the poem. This is similar to Retallack’s (2007) description of Juliana Spahr’s ‘mode that attempts to invite extra-textual experience into the poetics somehow on *its* terms, terms other than those dictated by egoistic desires’. In ‘White graphite’ ‘self’s how//a tern’s clutch nests in next to nothing :’ and ‘matter a mere shift/ in limits, even skin’s//a trick of the liminal : touch here & I give//way to elsewhere.’ (Teare 2013: 16-17). Teare’s collage represents these concerns in form, holding images next to each other in a simultaneity that is not linear or hierarchical. The self appears to us through the body, through senses which are approximate, the ‘surf sounding long/before I smell salt :’ and interdependent with the natural world in the ‘tern’s clutch’. What Teare finds in the white space is normally sound. Sound becomes perception that ties language to world allowing Teare to consider what an extra human language might be, a voice of the larger world.

In the long sequence poem ‘Sussurus stanzas (*Sutro Baths*)’ Teare (2013: 18-25) opens with a Ronald Johnson epigraph ‘Sound is sea: pattern lapping pattern’ and follows with the opening lines ‘pure ruin a stanza open/ to weather’. The epigraph is literalised, with the tidal bath becoming a stanza of the wider poem of sea ‘in which seeing is thinking/ to find a way a language/ to where the human fails’. In the end of this stanza,

seeing surpasses thinking and the perceptual world occupies a language beyond the human. There is an interesting tension between the lyric qualities of the poem, its consideration of extra human language and the use of high rhetoric as discursive strategy, something which is permitted by the use of collage. In the second stanza of the poem Teare (19) introduces a key question seemingly in the form of a thesis statement: ‘if// “human nature” is “to stand//in the middle of a thing”//what is a nature’. The answer he finds is not an answer but a desire: ‘I want to get//closer to where material//touches language “impatient//with ruins”’. In these lines Teare performs a reading, and subsequent rewriting, of Marianne Moore through the lens of Merleau-Ponty, however this critical act is secondary to the earthly concerns of the poem. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell (1996: 5) laments how common critical practice places text first without concern for, or even acknowledgment of, the actuality of the referent. At least in part he sees this as resulting from criticism practiced in urban cloisters, away from the natural world. Teare uses textual arrangements and the incorporation of literary theory pioneered by Language poets but his poiesis means his criticism can only emerge from the body located in space. This necessarily means a criticism that recognises the centrality of the natural referent.

This is a criticism that we see evade logic, utilising its textual strictures to end up unresolved and located in a bodily apperception of the world. We see this in how the final ‘Susurrus stanzas’ reads:

/

aseity assay or essay
to be a beautiful word
above all & wonder
just so toward “world
& flesh not as fact
or sum of facts but
as locus of an inscription
of truth” what I am
saying a sight
to stand on softly
fog enters the stanza
open to weather

Teare opens this stanza with a philosophical etymological breakdown, one that links self with essay and the sacred, so in reverse the poem form becomes essay which becomes self. He then devotes the centre third of the stanza to an extended quote from Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, which, instead of continuing to unpack in the form of philosophical treatise, he elaborates as 'a sight/ to stand on', blending the ephemeral of sight with the actuality of the physical world—in effect a collage of perceptions. The poem ends, as did 'White graphite', with a move towards openness, the elsewhere of the natural world of 'fog' and 'weather'. We see in Teare's work an attempt at embedding consciousness, and logic, in the world without making the world simply an exterior facet of it. This is permitted by his collage, which places ideas and images next to, and on top of one another, in simultaneity as a whole but without hierarchy—what Scalapino (2011: 5) terms 'paratactic-as-analytic'. The collage acts in concert with his epistemological, and theological, concerns, '*aseity assay essay*', making the human body inextricable from the whole that is outside it.

Yet there is something not entirely satisfying about arguing that the two Teare poems considered offer an ecocentrism that overcomes anthropocentrism. As part of my own consideration of these texts, I performed a collage exercise of sorts, a 'wreading'. This also served as a way of recognising my own context, my own place, in creating this criticism, the West Australian coastal desert town of Cervantes. One of these poems was a rewriting of the third stanza of 'Susurrus stanzas' as follows, with Teare's original italicised:

Sussurrus stanza

(*Cervantes*)

/

*but the coast road isn't
finished yet with
the how-not-to-touch-it creature map
the tide-chart turns waves interactive
the moon spun to background noise shivers
and fizzing sand off the dune the spindrift
gifted wind sifts and settles it down
onto bricks crashed at Kangaroo Point Lookout
the afternoon cry of the Sulphur crests ended there's
nothing but rubber-tire rhythm and yellow signs*

designed *to hit* the driver's *vision*
with dead animal *images* until the road's end:
where *the sentence* "Welcome to Cervantes" *breaks*
to let in the town *the* we were *there*

My poetic rewriting is not offered as a superior poem; however, through its composition I was able to isolate what I find troubling in the Teare which is an underutilisation of the actual.

Buell (1996: 97) identifies what he terms a nonfictionalist aesthetic of double accountability: a fidelity to the text and to the actuality of the real world, where 'the text's outer mimetic function is as important as its intertextual dimension, and that its selectivity is an instrument for promoting knowledge rather than suppressing it'. What I find missing in 'Susurrus stanzas' is the balance between mimetic function and intertextual dimension. The text promotes mimesis as poesis but does not fully embody this in actual description of landscape. Looking out at my own weed-covered dunes and smelling the rot of fish and salt while comparing it to the landscape of Sutro Baths offered by 'Susurrus stanzas' is to realise that the latter in its engagement with pure sound swims too close to an idealised ur-beach. This is the risk run when work aims towards an infinite perspective, that it will end up in something like the constant unfurling of the mathematical sublime (Rigby 2004: 202).

It is not entirely fair or accurate to make these broad assessments of Teare on the basis of individual poems. I began this analysis by assessing his use of a notes section, indicating a concern for looking at the collection as a corpus, a whole body. Just as in individual poems throughout the whole collection Teare layers and creates a composite of intertextuality, phenomenological theory and the natural world, specifically directing us to reconsider and reframe the American transcendentalists. As we move through the collection as a whole, his interrogation of his antecedents in American naturism deepens, largely through the addition of finely tuned detail that intersect with the initial poems, almost as if Teare is accreting layers of sediment over time.

Teare's (2013: 50-64) long sequence poem 'Transcendental Grammar Crown' is his most concerted 'wreading' of American naturism. In this sequence we see Teare play with the interaction of sonnet's two most common definitions: argument and song. Each of the sixteen sections is addressed to a figure, or key idea, of American creators who precede him: Thoreau, Emerson, Dickinson, Fuller and the composer Ives. His aim is not to construct a critical argument but to come to a deeper understanding of the work as it relates to his own poesis. Teare avoids constructing a linear argument through disrupting the form of the sonnet crown and his poetics of collage. None of the sonnets has the same lineation and where the traditional crown form repeats the last line of the preceding sonnet as the first line in the next, Teare repeats a word or phrase but not in exactness. This is necessary and is akin to how he embraces his antecedents while also reformulating them, collaging their thought with his own and with the natural world. It is thus that we encounter in the first sonnet 'The leap from matter (*idealism*)':

to say to be our body is sticky hurt fir white-green lichen the fawn's
brown sides shot through with spots like pastured asters we walk in
skin & salamanders exactly the orange of old pine & still we love
our minds *do* seem clearer the way quartz tricks a window into earth

Here we enter the natural space of Emerson and Thoreau, a simplicity of nature which makes the mind 'seem clearer'. Yet this is not a philosophical retreat to Walden, instead, in an exquisite collage of details, nature is entered through the body as a fir, lichen, a fawn, asters, and 'salamanders exactly the orange of old pine'. Only after this litany of images does the mind come in, only briefly and, in the italicising of '*do*', ironically, before we see the mind as quartz embedded in earth.

This very specific natural detail is intertwined with sonnets more ideologically driven, linked through the form of the sonnet crown. The most directed criticism and re-envisioning is levelled at Thoreau in the sonnet 'This book can't be sung' (*reading Walden*):

—solitude self-definition : pure
nationalism! beans in a row & a year
to hoe them heroic vatic stance struck mock
epic all ironic to trick the mind into seeing
America a masculine parable a second-growth
forest to walk there an easy wilderness vernacular
apples your grammar so declarative *it is*

The 'declarative' language hides the subtleties of Teare's approach to Thoreau. In the first sestet Teare brings in key images from *Walden* and makes an argument for Thoreau deliberately, 'all ironic', constructing *Walden* as a 'mock/epic', renouncing both normative readings of *Walden* as nature or political treatise. The second sestet has the public taking what is intended as 'mock' as serious, using it to establish a cohesive national identity of 'inherited citizen dualism'. The use of the sonnet form here seems particularly apt. As Tana Welch (2014: 17) articulates the sonnet carries with it political resonances: 'the English form became popular as Britain embarked on its massive centuries-long colonial project' and would later be used by those 'who hoped "literary transcendence" could quell lower class unrest, as well as indigenous rebellions in the empire's vast colonies'. In this context, Teare's disruption of the sonnet form through collage is itself a political action.

Assessing this particular sonnet in isolation, the tone taken by Teare to *Walden* could seem dismissive, even derogatory; however, the declarative syntax in the context of prosody which is otherwise so musical seems itself 'mock', particularly when combined

with the subtitle (*This book can't be sung*). There is ambivalence in how this tone can be seen as either directed at *Walden* or directed at the criticism of *Walden*. This is one of the points at which Teare is clearest in its bringing together different approaches to ecopoetry. I would propose that Teare is truly ambivalent about the legacy of *Walden*, in all its critical and creative particularities. We see this best by placing the sonnet back in context, where, although perhaps Teare disagrees with the politics of *Walden* and their environmental legacy, in his emphasis on detail in other sonnets he writes from a particular way of looking developed by Thoreau. In his seminal work on Thoreau, Buell (1996: 304) highlights Thoreau's use of two key perspectival features inherited from Emerson. These are a focus on minutiae and a zooming between the large and small, features obviously present in *Companion Grasses*. This focus on vision is emphasized across criticism of ecopoetry as a way of reducing anthropocentrism by concerted direction of the gaze outside the human (Keller 2012). As Thoreau writes in his journal 'the question is not what you look at—but how you look and whether you see' (Thoreau ctd in Buell 1996: 99). As for the subtitle, placed back into the crown it takes it impetus from the final stanza of the previous sonnet 'Hello (*Ives*)'

—must a song always
 be a song

 some
 in this book can't be sung

Here Teare's constant reference to song acts as a rejoinder to both *Companion Grasses* and *Walden*, a reminder of voices outside the text.

In 'Transcendental Grammar Crown' the larger crown form interacts with the smaller poetic techniques of lineation, use of white space and punctuation to perform collage across levels. Similarly both 'Transcendental Grammar Crown' and the individual poems considered, 'Susurrus Stanzas' and 'White Graphite', act in concert and in tension with the collection as a larger whole. In all instances collage is represented of Teare's particular poesis, one grounded in the interaction of body and world. In an interview with Christy Davids (2015), Teare states of the poems in *Companion Grasses* that he thought 'about [the] poems on the page as being a scoring of an encounter with a place or a species. Because so many of those poems—all of them, really—were written on foot, were written in the field, I was really trying to use prosody and typography as a musical registration of an encounter'. Collage is formed by the poet in the field bringing together his perceptions—what his gaze rests on, what his ear hears—with what his mind drifts to, other poets, literary and phenomenological theory. The emphasis on the actuality of the referent sought by more traditional ecocritics is recognized but layered with the type of intertextuality developed by the Language poets. Although located in the singular body of the poet and in the singular form of the text, the collage form allows for multitudes of

perspectives, making the singular lyric 'I' just one in a chorus of human and other-than-human voices.

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