FOR POETRY IS A WAY OF HAPPENING

AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TOWARDS JULIANA SPAHR'S "IF YOU WERE A BLUEBIRD" AND "DYNAMIC POSITIONING"

Universiteit Utrecht

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cover image	Controlled oil burns near the site of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Photographer: Derick E. Hingle (2010).

name	Saskia Fleur Soelaksana	
student number	5985706	
course	Bachelor Eindwerkstuk	EN3V14001
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supervisor	Dr. Cathelein Aaftink	
second reader	Dr. Mia You	
educational institution	Utrecht University	
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For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives

In the valley of its making where executives

Would never want to tamper, flows on south

From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,

Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.

W.H. Auden 43-48

Abstract

This thesis considers in what way ecocritical poetry can function as an act of activism, and to what extent it is able to generate change in the reader. Through a close reading of two poems from Juliana Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came,* I analyzed the ways in which these poems expose human culpability in environmental crises, and how they might engage the reader to reassess their role in the whole. Both "If You Were a Bluebird" and "Dynamic Positioning" reveal underlying systems and interrelatedness, ultimately exposing our, including the reader's, share in the deterioration and depletion of this planet. By using the BP oil crisis as the core vehicle for the poems' metaphors, Spahr creates an immediate realism. Via the use of matters of fact to ignite matters of concern, and via the principle of relations, Spahr's poetry confronts with the fact of our complicity in environmental crises. In response to the explication of the reader's complicity, they become responsive and embark on a critical reassessment of their share, finally assuming responsibility.

Introduction

Almost one decade has passed since a surge of natural gas rushed through a fracture in the cement core that was put into place to seal off the Macondo oil well. Almost one decade has passed since this gas blasted upwards through the encased tubes and into the Deepwater Horizon vessel, where it ignited and caused the death of eleven workers. And almost one decade has passed since the oil platform succumbed to the water weight and capsized, rupturing the riser, ultimately releasing close to 500 million liters[1] of crude oil into the ocean. On April 20th 2010, a series of ill-fated malfunctions caused the largest oil spill to date, which is now often referred to as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the BP oil spill, the Macondo blowout or the BP oil disaster. The crude oil seeped into surrounding waters and a slick extended over thousands of square miles in the Gulf of Mexico, infiltrating coastlines from Florida to Texas. As a result of this colossal environmental disaster, a range of ecological responses across different species, spatial locations and ecosystems occurred. It is a moment where the Anthropocene[2] has proven

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[1] Initially, it was estimated that a total oil discharge of 4.9 million barrels (210 million U.S. Gallons and over 780 million liters) had leaked into the Gulf of Mexico from the spill; "however, the estimate was challenged in litigation, reduced to 3.19 million barrels by a trial court, and remains in dispute" (Ward 4).

[2] The term "Anthropocene" is used to "describe the advent of a new geological epoch characterized by the legibility of anthropogenic impacts on earth systems, including human and nonhuman forms of inhabitation" (Merola 25). Rather than an anthropocentric approach, ecocriticism departs from an earth-centered perspective.

eminently toxic, and, therefore it has become a pivot in ecocritical discourse.

Since just before the turn of the millennium, interest in environmentalism has continued to increase and a discourse of ecocriticism has developed into an established critical movement. Ecocriticism offers a way to reflect on the systems and actions that have preceded, led to and maintain the environmental crises our biosphere faces today. It is the study of "the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production" (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* i). Over the last decades, awareness of the human involvement in the deterioration of our environment has grown, and it has become apparent that, in order to restore and save our planet, a change in our way of living must occur. To generate this change, we must go beyond the scientific facts and find new ways to engage people so that they may internalize the gravity of the situation and, ultimately, adjust their habits. Therefore, environmental humanities scholars must find "more compelling ways to foreground connections between environmental and social justice" and they "must reach across ideological, species, and scalar boundaries to find common ground in this new geologic epoch" (Bladow & Ladino 3).

One way of doing this, could be through the act of literary activism. "Reading is one instance in which affect begins at the 'micro-scale,' and scholarship that draws on … what happens affectively in readers is an area of growing interest" (3). Moreover, literature is the place where an otherwise silent speaker, such as nature or the underlying structures of our being within nature, can express themselves and call to attention the political matters that concern its being. Ecocritical poetry, then, becomes a place that exposes the political discourse of nature. It is "a poetic tradition that articulates collective subject positions as alternatives to the hegemonic assumptions that maintain the exclusionary mechanisms of the world-system" (C. Spahr 5). It is a place that reveals the culpability of our actions, a place that reveals "the world" and, particularly, it reveals "man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the subject which has been thus laid bare" (Sartre 38). This thesis will consider the ways in which ecocritical poetry is a political act, and how it reveals the interrelations of our ecosystem as it exposes

human's role in the destruction of nature. Through the exposure, we are confronted with our ways of being, and we are moved to adjusting our way of life. As such, ecopoetry can bring about change and plays a vital part in the ecocritical spectrum.

Juliana Spahr is one such poet that seeks to lay bare the systems and interrelations of man to nature, so that the crisis of our environment becomes tangible. Throughout her collection *That Winter the Wolf Came*, the BP oil disaster serves as one of the ecocritical vehicles; the moments leading up to it and the inhabitants of the ecosystems that were comprehended by it, explicate relations of being and, in their exposure, it cannot be helped but make us feel (partially) responsible for it. I will analyze two of her poems to prove this fact. In order to establish this argument, this thesis offers a theoretical background, the close reading of the poems "If You Were a Bluebird" and "Dynamic Positioning," and a contextualization of both poems in ecocritical discourse. In chapter one, I will discuss poetry's political potential and what it means for literature to practice activism. Their efficacy depends on the type of audience the poetry is directed to, therefore, a brief characterization of the receptive reader is also added. Furthermore, the theoretical framework discusses the contested notions of ecocriticism, ecopoetics and ecopoetry further, and ends with an introduction to Juliana Spahr and her collection *That Winter the Wolf Came*. In chapter two, I will analyze the act of literary activism in "If You Were a Bluebird," and in chapter three I will repeat this process for "Dynamic Positioning." Through a focus on the systems and relations that are represented in the poems as well as those they reveal through style and reference, I will argue that Spahr's ecopoetry succeeds in the act of literary activism and moves to ecological improvement. Finally, chapter four will situate the poetry in ecocritical discourse, illustrating its contribution to the field.

1 Theoretical Background

1.1 Introduction

In order to understand Spahr's poems as an act of activism, this chapter will provide a theoretical background to ecopoetry. I will begin by constructing poetry as a political medium and what it means to engage the reader in the reciprocal political act. From there, I will proceed to construe poetry's activist potential, which will lead me to ecopoetry and the function of ecocritical poetry. I will conclude the chapter with a characterization on Spahr, in so far as her career and lifestyle reflect the activist poet, and I will conclude with an introduction to *That Winter the Wolf Came*.

1.2 Poetry as a Political Act

Fundamentally, poetry is a medium of language that seeks to portray meaning and to position this meaning in its reader's consciousness. As such, poetry is exceptionally well-suited for political ends. To be political,[3] is to utter a perspective that the utterer considers worth hearing by a greater audience, a perspective that ultimately contests the status quo. Poetry is similar to the

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[3] Rancière's "Ten Theses on Politics" asserts what it means for something to be political. He contests the idea that politics are a matter of the exertion of power by the State or authoritative entities, rather, it is a matter of what people do and in particular what people do in order to challenge the hierarchical order of a given set of social arrangements. Rancière calls the disruption that is created by this, the notion of dissensus. He says, that "[t]he essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to make the world of its subjects and its operations seen. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one" (Rancière 37).

political language of rhetoric, in that it "is language that makes abundant use of figures of speech and language" and "aims to be powerfully persuasive" (Culler 70). Poetry, then, is an aesthetically executed utterance, that creates a space for its meaning by engaging the reader's consciousness. Jean-Paul Sartre's work *What Is Literature* provides a fitting description of the poet's intent: "the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the subject which has been thus laid bare" (Sartre 38). This underscores the poet's political intent, since, according to Sartre, the aim of literature is to attest to a status quo, whether it be out of dissent or out of consent. In addition, it refers to the role of the reader, as Sartre means the poetry's reader to assume responsibility for the issue at hand. I will return to the notion of the reader in section 1.3. Moreover, poetry can raise awareness by way of its engagement with the reader, and, as such, it can pierce the reader's consciousness in a much more profound way than the simple presentation of scientific facts. For facts are not that which construe a sense of reality; "[m]atters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, … very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern" (Latour 232). While poetry may incorporate matters of fact, it does so to appeal to the matter of concern that lies at the foundation of those facts. It is never the question of getting "*away* from facts," but, rather, it is a way of getting "*closer* to them," it is not about "fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, [about] renewing empiricism" (Latour 231). Through poetry, the poet provokes engagement with the use of realist content. "[T]he critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a *stubbornly realist attitude,*" as such, literary activism incorporates "a realism dealing with what [Latour calls] *matters of concern*" (231). Spahr, as the next two chapters will come to illustrate, applies this notion in her poetry to persuade her reader as she uses matters of fact to expose the matters of concern. In John Haines' essay "What Are Poets For?," he asserts that "[l]iterature is the written expression of revolt against accepted things," and goes as far as to argue that a "brief reading through any representative anthology of poetry in English reveals how often poets in the past have turned to

this public rebuke of persons and policies; it is difficult to recall a major poet in whom this capacity and its expression are entirely absent" (Haines 20). Haines, then, argues for the political poet: they who write, write in revolt and take a stand in a certain subject matter through their poetry.

1.3 The Receptive Reader

Still, the act of revolt can only occur in the acquiescence of another party, which is why the political poet is in need of an audience; a reader. The poem cannot convey meaning if its contents are not heard (or read). The interaction calls for a receptive and perceptive audience. By this, I mean that it calls for a reader that is open to interpret the poem's meaning and one that has a certain talent to interpret it accurately (while taking into consideration that a poem can hold multiple meanings).

The interaction is similar to that of a work of art and its spectator. It is, for example, up to the spectator to appreciate and understand the artwork, given the situation that the artist has made it understandable. Robin G. Collingwood argued that art in itself revolves around this reciprocated action, and as such he argued for the case that art is, in fact, language (Collingwood 273). He further argues, that art is a process that occurs in the activity of consciousness. Consciousness, he writes, "is a level of experience intermediate between the psychic and the intellectual," and art is what occurs in the transaction of the artist's consciousness to the consciousness of the spectator (273). According to Collingwood,

> [T]he crude emotion of the psychical level is translated into idealized emotion, or the so-called aesthetic emotion, which is thus not an emotion pre-existing to the expression of it, but the emotional charge on the experience of expressing a given emotion, felt as a new colouring which that emotion receives in being expressed. (Collingwood 274)

The artist calls upon the spectator to be receptive to what they want to convey in their work of art. This calls for a sensitive spectator, or, in the case of poetry, for a sensitive reader. Because,

"man is capable of poetry at any time only to the degree to which his being is appropriate to that which itself has a liking for man and therefore needs his presence. Poetry is authentic or inauthentic according to the degree of this appropriation" (Heidegger qtd. in Garrard "Heidegger" 169). Unless the prerequisite of a receptive reader is met, the poetic interaction will not succeed and the poet will fail to reveal man to men and truly engage the reader to assume responsibility for their ecological wrongdoing.

1.4 Poetry as Activism

In section 1.2 it has been established that poetry is in itself a political thing, in that it negotiates meaning. It is the representation of a message that holds meaning in the interpretation of the reader. It "not only constructs the horizon of understanding, the world, within which we experience the being of beings. It is also, more grandly, through language that we answer to the call of Being by drawing things forth into the 'clearing'(*Lichtung*) of an articulated world. Language is thus, … the 'house of Being'; for, 'only the word grants being to a thing'" (Rigby 433). It then follows that literary activism pivots on the notion of granting 'Being' to a political issue. In its most radical form, a literary text can raise consciousness and create a political space. When a literary text aims to enhance the political consciousness of the reader, or to represent or address a particular political movement or issue, it concerns a piece of literary activism. The issues that the text raises are often those of dissent; they contest the current situation of a certain matter and, as such, can be justly called a poetics of resistance. "[T]he poetics of resistance raises an awareness," that alternatives to the rule are "necessary, possible, and have been an objective tendency, both historically in the present" (C. Spahr 2). Poetic activism, then, seeks to expose the possibility of change.

By deepening the audience's understanding of an already known issue, authors and their texts become activist in nature. Poetic activism calls on the reader to engage with the poem's message, and, finally, assume responsibility to make change happen. It is dependent on the

perceptive and receptive reader, because it is a reciprocated act; it activates their consciousness and provokes a reassessment of the issue at hand. The system of reciprocation establishes an intimate community between the poet, the reader and the poem's intent. Literary activism, like arts activism, and in particular poetic activism, is a "tradition that articulates collective subject positions as alternatives to the hegemonic assumptions that maintain the exclusionary mechanisms of the world-system" (C. Spahr 5). These "mechanisms do not simply pose as alternatives to, or try to resolve the tensions and contradictions" of the system they contest, but, rather, "work on a level of representation to question the ideological mechanisms that maintain that very system by reproducing its structures (consciously or unconsciously) in everyday life" (5). Both "If You Were a Bluebird" and "Dynamic Positioning" illustrate the innerworkings of ecological mechanisms and, furthermore, use these to criticize human's role in our ecosystem.

1.5 Ecocriticism, Ecopoetics and Ecopoetry

One of the subjects that has become a focus point for literary activism in the last couple of decades, is the environment. Since just before the turn of the twenty-first century, ecocritical discourse amassed following and has developed into a popular research field. In response to the bleak discoveries concerning our planet's climate change and the threats of exhaustion and pollution our ecosystem is under, ecocriticism has risen to assess the devastation of nature and invoke change in our way of being, in pursuit of a system of sustainable living. Still, ecocriticism, ecopoetry and ecopoetics remain terms that incur dispute among scholars. Therefore, the next three subsections will discuss how this thesis will interpret them.

1.5.1 Ecocriticism

In just over two decades, environmental criticism, or ecocriticism, has developed from a somewhat neglected and relatively 'under the radar' movement into a movement of standing and great reach within literary and cultural studies. "*Ecocriticism* explores the ways in which we imagine

and portray the relationship between humans and the environment in all areas of cultural production" (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* i). And ecocritical discourse offers "another cultural location for Anthropocene capture," as well as traps "the more embodied and personal forms that scientific technologies sieve; they engage affective registers not conventionally appropriate to scientific forms" (Merola 28). It provides a way to reflect on the systems and actions that have led to and maintain the environmental crises the world faces today. Although ecocriticism is only just emerging as a strong contender to other movements in literary criticism, it has very ancient roots. "In one form or another the 'idea of nature' has been a dominant or at least a residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since these fields came into being" (Buell 2). Take, for example, the eighteenth century Romantic poetry and its turn away from the 'enlightened' and *techné*-driven society towards the refuge in idyllic nature. The Romantics wrote to contest "the artificial machinery and 'busy hum of men' in a city" by juxtaposing it with the "raptures … as arising from the view of beautiful scenery, and sublime objects of nature enjoyed in tranquility" (Wordsworth 161). Already, their nature poetry uttered human's need for nature and engaged the reader in alternative thought to the hegemonic views dictated by the Enlightenment and its ever technologically advancing society.

Ecocriticism, then, is certainly not unique to our age. Still, it can be argued that the political content of ecocriticism becomes increasingly specific in modernity and that it has become more pervasive in art during the era of globalization (Mesch 2). Like the Romantics, ecocriticism reflects on nature and how life is dependent on the survival of nature. However, it is radically different from it in the way the human self is related towards nature. Garrard argues that, "[a]t the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a *stable, enduring* counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies" (Garrard, *Ecocriticism* 63, emphasis mine). As opposed to ecocritical writing, the pastoral regards nature as this unchanging, stable thing. However, at the heart of ecocriticism lies the idea that nature is being destroyed, and that it is our responsibility to create a sustainable (ecological) system. Ecocriticism aims to work towards a

"mature environmental aesthetics – or ethics, or politics –" and takes into account "the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns" (Buell 22-23). It places *bios* and *Anthropos* on equal footing, rather than the exclusively anthropocentric regard the Romantics put forward. As such, ecocriticism is invested in the exposure of systems, both for the survival of nature as well as for the survival of man, and, correspondingly, in putting into operation a system of sustainability.

1.5.2   Ecopoetics

Furthermore, ecocriticism is lodged firmly into today's literary landscape and, in many cases, it is concerned with engaging the reader and achieving change for the better. This thesis aims to assert just how ecocritical poetry goes about doing this. But what does it mean to write about ecological issues? Ecopoetics can refer to a broad scope of subjects, however, Jonathan Skinner proposes to look beyond defining the concept and, rather, explore how it functions. Instead of applying ecopoetics as an umbrella term that encompasses both pastorals and human's relation to animal, Skinner asserts that:

> [r]ather than locate a "kind" of writing as "ecopoetic," it may be more helpful to think of ecopoetics as a form of site-specificity—to shift the focus from themes to topoi, tropes and entropologies, to institutional critique of "green" discourse itself, and to an array of practices converging on the *oikos*, the planet earth that is the only home our species currently knows. (Skinner 2011)

Ecopoetics, then, is more a way of writing than a genre. Skinner asserts that the eco in ecopoesis "signals – no more, no less - the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth" (Skinner qtd. in Reddick 433). Additionally, Rigby reminds us of the Heideggerian argument that "poetically man dwells," and that "poiesis extends ultimately to a whole way of life" (Rigby 430). To dwell is to inhabit, even to occupy, and it is "to create and preserve things and places, which in themselves disclose the interweaving … of earth, sky, divinities and mortals"

(430). Moreover, to dwell is to attune oneself "in that which one thinks, does, and makes to that which is given with earth and sky," that is to say; to dwell is to assume responsibility for the preservation of the space (430). Ecopoetics, then, is a way of criticizing the system as it is, and considers the practices concerning occupying and preserving the *oikos,* or ecosystem.

1.5.3 Ecopoetry

One expression of ecopoetics is ecocritical poetry, or ecopoetry. This poetry offers a critical view of the world's ecology, or *oikos*. To reiterate Skinner's argument, *oikos* means both ecology and home, which designates ecopoetry to be about our house, that is to say, the house we share with all other species on planet earth. Ecopoetry, then, "is *poetry of habitat*: appropriate for evoking a world that encompasses local, global, biotic, human and non-human elements; and, critically, the ways in which we have irreversibly altered our habitat" (Reddick 44). In the process of ecopoetry, the subjectivity of the human is called into question. Timothy Clark gives a definition of ecopoetry in his *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*:

> At issue is an aesthetic interested in formal experimentation and the conception of the poet or poem as forming a kind of intellectual or spiritual frontier, newly coupled with a sense of the vulnerability and otherness of the natural world, distrust of a society dominated by materialism and instrumental reason, and sometimes giving a counter affirmation [sic] of nonwestern modes of perception, thought or rhetorical practice. The poem is often conceived as a space of subjective redefinition and rediscovery through encounters with the non-human. (Clark 139)

From Clark's definition it follows, that ecocritical poetry – as "a space of subjective redefinition and rediscovery" – offers its reader a space for becoming conscious of and coming to terms with a required intervention (Clark 139). Ecopoetry serves as the renegotiation that precedes the act of change as it engages the reader in a critical reassessment of current affairs. Here, I return to Sartre's remark: "the writer has chosen to reveal the world and particularly to reveal man to other

men so that the latter may assume full responsibility before the subject which has been thus laid bare" (Sartre 38). It is through the process of ecopoetry, this system of poet, poem and reader, that responsibility for the destruction of our *oikos* is designated and, ultimately, assumed.

1.6 Juliana Spahr as a Literary Activist

Juliana Spahr practices ecocriticism in most of her more recent poetry. She is a poet, a scholar, and, moreover, she is an activist. Her poetry is just one of the ways she exercises the latter. As a Berkeley scholar and resident of the Bay area, she is part of a community that does not shy away from a protest and she has proven herself a true participant in the protest culture. For example,

> [i]n addition to her direct involvement with Occupy,[4] Spahr has been outspoken in her commitment to transforming the status quo. Whether in the academic world, addressing rhetoric/comp departments' practice of hiring an increasing number of part-time rather than full-time faculty track positions, … or with the substantial numbers difference when it comes to representation of women and/or poets of color compared to white males within poetry publishing. (Dunagen)

In all her capacities, Spahr strives towards the full realization of the necessity that things must change (Dunagen). An earlier collection of poetry, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs,* addresses the dire repercussions of 9/11 and "deploy[s] an innovative poetics to frame into view varying and emerging crises of ecological illogic" (Chisholm 118). In this 2005 publication, her work already showed a "complicated device of ecological thinking, one that provokes acute reflection on the habits of habitat construction" (Chisholm 118).

Moreover, Spahr's poetry often demonstrates an affinity with the land and animals, as

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[4] The Occupy movement was a socio-political movement that expressed opposition to social and economic inequality. "At the ideological level, activists connected to Occupy tend to engage in fierce contestation of the global structuring of greed, thus exhibiting clear signs of global rebellion" (Steger & James 17). Its aim was to reassess current form of democracy in pursuit of a greater shared equality.

well as the human existence and her involvement in activism deepens that affinity. Her growing awareness of the human's destructive role on earth through environmental squander influenced her development as a poet. Her poetry shows "a sustained engagement with human entanglement in large-scale ecological, economic, geopolitical, and social systems" (Merola 25). Additionally, her poetry is unapologetically honest. As a poet should aim for, according to Sartre. He argues, that a writer should consider their words 'loaded pistols': "If he speaks, he fires. He may be silent but since he has chosen to fire, he must do it … by aiming at targets, and not like a child, at random, by shutting his eyes and firing merely for the pleasure of hearing the shot go off" (Sartre 38). One of the ways *That Winter the Wolf Came* is strikingly purposefully aimed, is when Spahr quite outright and forthcoming specifies authoritative culprits in the BP oil disaster. For example, in "Dynamic Positioning," she calls out the then CEO for BP (Anthony Bryan Hayward) and the then Director of Minerals Management Service in the United States (S. Elizabeth Birnbaum), as well as several others, by their full name. She reproaches them for merely watching, a clear message that hits like a bullet after just having summed up the victims of the explosion. This candidness evokes a sense of immediate reality, something that serves the objective of engagement: "'the claims of realism' need to be revived in such a way as to bring out a 'dual accountability' in textual representations to both discursivity and materiality" (Head 32). Spahr's poetry intentionally seeks out facts to engineer an opening between the poem and reality. By creating a poetic argument founded on a factual landscape, the reader is persuaded to consider their reality and look critically at the status quo.

Furthermore, in Spahr's poetry, the individual body merges with the collective, a pivotal aspect to her development as an ecopoet. In the prelude to her poem "Poem written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003," a poem that was written in anticipation of invasion of Iraq by the United States, Spahr expresses that she felt the need "to think about what [she] was connected with, and what [she] was complicit with" (Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs,* 13). She asserts that from that perspective, the lyric poem, "with its attention to connection, with

its dwelling on the beloved and on the afar," becomes "suddenly somewhat poignant, somewhat apt, even somewhat more useful than [she] usually find[s] it" (13). Still, Spahr considers poetry unable to, in fact, make something happen. Rather, she says that it can only come close to *antagonizing* the status quo. In an interview for *Entropy* she says: "sometimes poems do things – call for revolution or critique racism – but despite this close proximity, as I understand it, it is at best a part of the ecosystem of antagonism, not the actual antagonism" (J. Spahr, *Entropy*). Still, if poetry precedes revolution can it not be argued that it is the spark that ignites revolution, and, furthermore, can it not be argued that the spark is inherently part of the process? Poetry is what sets things in motion, it is "a way of happening, a mouth," and I think ecopoetry plays a vital role in making change happen (Auden 43). I have chosen Spahr's "Dynamic Positioning" and "If You Were a Bluebird" to assess just how ecopoetry arrives at bringing out that 'dual accountability' and how it shows 'man to men' and engage them to assume responsibility towards a healthier *oikos*.

1.7   Spahr's Ecopoetry in *That Winter the Wolf Came*

Juliana Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came* was published in 2015. It is a collection of nine extensive poems, among which several prose-poems that read rather like short essays. Each poem can be read both independently as well as part of the calculated interconnectedness that makes up the entire collection. For example, the consecutive poems " If You Were a Bluebird" and "Calling You Here" are connected by their allusion to the country song "If You Were a Bluebird." Whereas the first shares its title, the second mimics the song in its structure. These works exemplify a reciprocal relationship in that they are inherently bound by the country song: while the first calls the second back because the title misses its syntax, the second lures you forward by 'calling you here.' The entanglement of these poems demonstrates an interrelatedness and connects the innerworkings of a poetic system.

This independent interdependence mimics the relationship of the individual to the whole,

a theme that is paramount to the effectiveness of Spahr's ecopoetry. The collection tells a narrative of global struggle and the ecological and economic dynamics that are both inherent and complicit to that struggle. In a framework of factual enumerations, rising action and elaborate, yet intricate, repetition, Spahr lays bare the global crises to which human beings are complicit and reveals its culprits. The use of factual information in the medium of poetry estranges, however, the shock-value that results from this estrangement is similar to that which we ought to feel from our participation in the Anthropocene. "The Anthropocene is fundamentally estranging: what we thought we knew about the continuance of a habitable biosphere for currently evolved creatures has turned out to be a mirage. The knowledge that we have fouled our only form of life support positions humans in an alienated relationship to the earth" (Merola 26). *That Winter the Wolf Came* sets out to inform the reader's critical mind as it transforms matters of fact into matters of concern. Correspondingly, it invokes change in those occupying our ecosystem. Its poetry is comprised of a set of formal experiments through which Spahr "questions, encounters, materializes, and wrestles with the epistemological and ontological pressures that accrue to the newly self-reflexive, anxious position into which the Anthropocene interpellates us" (26). Moreover, it sets out to motivate the reader to face this alienation and, essentially, to engage them with the issues at hand and work towards a solution.

The poems I will discuss in this chapter – "If You Were a Bluebird" and "Dynamic Positioning," respectively – each demonstrate a profound interconnectedness on a multitude of levels. They are complicated, in that they figure

> the construction of habitats by diverse cohabitants on local and global planes, and on
>
> multiple and unfathomable levels. [Spahr's] lyrics foreground the rhythmic buildup and
>
> breakdown of domestic and geopolitical processes by which everyone and everything
>
> become connected, with intensifying consequences. As micro and macro ecologies take
>
> figurative shape in her poems, they envelop and enter into each other affectingly on
>
> expanding cosmic horizons. (Chisholm 118)

First of all, in "If You Were a Bluebird," Spahr creates an elaborate *mis-en-scène*, which epitomizes the micro dwellings that poems can be. By referring in detail to facts, the reader is drawn into the microcosm and becomes inherent to it. Secondly, through a deceptively simple form of seventy-six equally syllabic couplets, "Dynamic Positioning" lists the culmination of factors that led to the disaster of the BP oil spill in 2010. Spahr intertwines nature with technological procedures and encompasses all involved parties, both culprit and victim, on the final page. Through the interchangeability of the 'they' and 'them and the' 'we' and 'I,' the poem establishes a shared sense of responsibility.

In the entanglement of these connections, Spahr draws the reader in and establishes the ultimate conditions for critical engagement with the global ecological crises that have resulted from centuries of anthropocentric choices. After revealing "man to other men," she merges all parties present and proposes a shared responsibility; man is, in fact, intrinsic to other men. A proposal that invites the reader to feel their complicity in the ecological crisis.

2 "If You Were a Bluebird"

2.1   Introduction

"If You Were a Bluebird" is the third poem of the collection, and offers a rich microcosm of beings, places and time. Through a complex web of factual information on nature and technology, representation and ambiguous reference, a community is established in which all beings and entities take equal part. After announcing to having begun "with a list," it proceeds with a list of nature's inhabitants (J. Spahr, "If You Were" 1). Yet, it ends with a list as well, although this list is comprised of sites of depletion, namely with fourteen locations of oil rigs across the globe. The dichotomous lists at either end of the poem illustrate a development for the worst from beginning to end. In a way, "If You Were a Bluebird" demonstrates the circle of life, and establishes an informative framework for the reader, from which they can proceed appropriately.

2.2   Matters of Fact

"If You Were a Bluebird" offers an imagined reality by creating a credible ecosystem that draws directly from fact and verifiable information. The concise and clear statement the poem opens with, "Began with a list," introduces the candidness that will persist throughout the poem (1). Initially, the poem catalogs information by using taxonomical phrases to announce the first beings of the poem's imagined ecosystem. "A bird. Reed cormorant. / Added a fish and a monkey. Hingemouth. White throated monkey" (2-3). Each being is preceded by a higher

taxonomical category they belong to, before their species is specified: a reed cormorant is a

species within the class of birds, a hingemouth is a species within the class of (ray-finned) fish

and a white throated monkey is a species within the family of monkeys (cebidae). The exactness

adds a sense of formality, as if these beings are presented for the first time, and for a moment it

seems like the speaker is creating a universe with a certain regard to themselves.

However, in the next lines it becomes apparent that these beings are added with no other

reason than that they are who and what they are. "Added because. / Because the six dorsal and

anal fins of the hingemouth and its two / teeth too and also its swim bladder like a lung, covered

in alveoli" (4-6). These beings are not placed in this ecosystem because they can be of service (to

humans), but, rather, they are added solely because they exist as they do. It emphasizes the

freedom of being for every creature, which reveals that the poem criticizes a way of living for

human's sake. It then follows, tentatively, that this poem originates from an ecocritical

perspective that puts the Anthropocene into question. Rather than justifying every being by an

anthropocentric cause, the poem proceeds to contextualize these beings to enrich the imaginative

ecosystem and creates a habitat. Furthermore, the poem's list of beings can be divided into three

parts, each belonging to a different habitat. Lines 2 to 20 belong to the Niger Delta followed by

lines 21 to 42 that occur in the Kuwait Bay[5] and finally, lines 43 to 61 pertain to the Gulf of

Mexico.[6] These are all sites of environmental distress. For example, the first location, the Niger

Delta,[7] is one that has been taunted by human intervention as industrial endeavors intruded upon

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[5] The Kuwait Bay is surrounded my human activity, including commercial and industrial activity, which has caused distress for the bay's ecosystem. "The phase of construction and development of projects, and their resulting pollution have led to major change in the features of the area (Al-Abdulghani et al. 445).

[6] In 2010, the Gulf of Mexico was the site of the BP oil spill. An environmental disaster that followed the explosive of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that was located there. "The BP Deep Water Horizon Gulf oil spill was a man-made disaster that assaulted a naturally developed and ecologically balanced productive coast (Eargle et al. ix).

[7] Since 1976, over 12,000 oil spill incidents have occurred in the Niger Delta, causing it to be in a constant state of environmental crisis. "Big oil spills are common in the Niger Delta where over 40 million liters of crude oil is spilled annually, resulting in human deaths and damage to the local ecosystem" (Adebayo).

nature, which resulted in a severe deterioration of its ecosystem.

After having introduced character and site, the poem now turns to action. The hingemouth swims and the "reed / cormorant dives down to considerable depths in the delta and also / dives to feed, as it tends to do, in more shallow water" and the white throated monkey "bangs objects against the ground, throws sticks" (13-20). The beings occupy the space they find themselves in, their habitat, and dwell. This shows that Spahr's poetry is framed by "a complicated device of ecological thinking," and that it elicits a critical assessment on the "habits of habitat construction" (Chisholm 118). This framework of ecological thinking, then, distills the action of dwelling, in that it disentangles what it means to inhabit and preserve a dwelling, or habitat. The actions of the bird, the fish and the monkey, as well as those of the other beings that are introduced later on in the poem,[8] give life to their respective roles that maintain the ecosystem. By setting distinctive classes of beings on equal footing, it can be argued that they are representative for all inhabitants of the ecosystem, and, as such, representative for how human beings ought to function in the *oikos*. "If mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth" (Bate 282). Here, Spahr's poetry presents an argument for engaging the reader in preserving the ecosystem. Through the explication of matters of fact concerning the imagined ecosystem of the poem, Spahr makes "If You Were a Bluebird" a convincing site of representation for our ecosystem. From this starting point, the poem proceeds to persuade the reader by conjuring matters of concern.

2.3   A Complex Web of Relations

The flow of repetition asserts the poem's tantalizing rhythm. The use of direct statements drives the enumerations to such a feverish a repetition, that the poem reads like a hypnotic song.

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[8] For example, the "Eurasian spoonbill" and "a crab and a fish" are added, located in a second dwelling, namely the Kuwait Bay (22-24, 34). These creatures are allotted an act of dwelling in the enumeration that follows from line 36 to 42.

Phrases like "added because" and phrases starting with "So," "Returned to," "Waiting" and "Together," are reiterated in a seemingly erratic manner, yet, as the poem progresses, the interconnectedness slowly becomes more apparent (J. Spahr, "If You Were" 4, 13, 46, 67 & 108). This interconnectedness underscores the poem's objective to engage its reader. From a very focused starting point – "A bird" – Spahr expands the imagined ecosystem geographically to locations across the globe (occupying "airstrips, helicopter pads, oil storage areas, docks"), socially to large, organized gatherings ("slowly at first. / One at a time … And then more"), and historically to events of protest (1789 and 1871 and 1917 and / 1918 and 1929 and 1969"[9]), finally merging all these interspecific parts and putting them to use for one specific purpose (2, 126, 133-34, 136, 140-41). Namely, exposing the interrelatedness of the ecological systems.

On the tenth line, we encounter another repeated phrase "Added the principle of relation" for the first time (10). The principle of relation is congruent to human as he desires space, or cosmos: "Man has to take cognizance of this vital principle if it is cosmos that he desires and not chaos. He can find happiness and well-being only by identifying with the former" (Freed 1489). The principle of relation is a phenomenon used in the discourse of guilt, which motivates the argument that this poem is written in pursuit of establishing a sense of culpability. The interwovenness of beings, sites and actions in the poem constructs a web of argument, as it engages the reader in discussion. The rising cadences enthrall the reader, transforming the phrases into hypnotic mantras. As such, the poem becomes a change inducing space, because, according to Spahr, hypnosis is when language changes the mind (J. Spahr, *Juliana Spahr Interview* 12:40). Spahr's poetry, then, applies the principle of relation to captivate its reader in the

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[9] At first sight, these dates can be understood as significant historical moments. For example, 1789 is the year of the French Revolution and in 1929 poverty spread in the United States after the stock market crashed. However, a closer look at the preceding lines demonstrates a focus on women's activism (e.g. "when the women went to gather" and "The women and the women-identified" in lines 120-21, 140). Therefore, the more evident reference constituted in "1929" is, rather, the Aba women's riots in Nigeria that occurred in November and December in 1929 (van Allen 11). A further comparison will be drawn in a later section. This ambiguity marks the interconnectedness of everything, once more.

interdependence of all beings and their actions, including their own. The interwoven web of beings, sites and history collaborates in encompassing the reader.   Firstly, as the poem progresses, the beings that dwell in the imagined ecosystem, e.g. the birds, the crab, the monkey, the fish and the mammal, become increasingly interlinked. After their individual introductions, their ways of being are connected through the anaphoral lines that begin with "So" (J. Spahr, "If You Were" 13, 15, 19, 36, 39, 41, 54, 58, 59). The repetition blurs the lines between the ways of dwelling and the accumulation leads to an ultimate moment in the poem where all beings are merged into one sentence that takes up a sizeable block of prose poetry (85-102). The (nearly) square block looks like its own space within the poem, as if it is its own *oikos*. This ultimate togetherness exemplifies the ideal dwelling; a habitat where all beings coexist and live in the extension of one another.

Secondly, the meaning of being together, of dwelling in co-existence in the imagined ecosystem of the poem, is expanded to include the 'I' of the poem. The inclusion of the "I" is preluded on the preceding page, as the speaker says "I am waiting … Said to no one in particular. / Said we are waiting" (62, 64, 65). Following the wish of wanting to be together and the summation of all beings thus far mentioned in the poem, the speaker makes explicit that by together they include themselves: "and me too. I / mean us. Together" (106-7). This direct statement extends the imagined ecosystem to that of the ecosystem beyond the boundaries of the page. By referring to 'I' and 'us,' both speaker and reader are projected as extensions to the bird, the fish and the monkey.

Furthermore, the poem is interspersed with a variety of informative locations. By stretching the locus of the poem over a broad geological variety, the poem comes to encompass both healthy and unhealthy ecosystems. It draws in the far and wide, as well as the near and specific, and it all becomes part of the poem's imagined ecosystem. The aforementioned Niger Delta, the Kuwait Bay and the Gulf of Mexico are all sites of environmental crises; places where human intervention has caused serious deterioration of the ecological systems. The poem zooms

in on these sites of ecological disaster to explicate the 'spaces in spaces' that are created by their inhabitants. For example, in the Kuwait Bay, the cleistostostona kuwaitense, a crab, is "building a semi-permanent / mud hood over the entrance to its burrow" and the mudskipper digs "a deep burrow" and then hides "in it / during high tide, a polygonal territory surrounded by dams, and / defended against rivals, yet also shared with digging crabs" (28-29, 30-32). The magnification of the Kuwait Bay reveals the site's connection to its inhabitants that each create for themselves a microsphere, a dwelling, in which they invest and which preservation they defend.

Then, the poem departs from this magnification back out into a scope that spans the greater part of our globe by hopping between three continents, namely Africa (Niger Delta), Asia (Kuwait Bay) and North America (Gulf of Mexico). Spahr embarks from "[o]ne location at a time. / And then more" and travels further by referring to historical sites simply by the representation of the year remarkable acts of dwelling, or activism, occurred (134-35, 139-40). The dates "1789," "1871," "1917," "1918," "1929" and "1969" all possibly refer to historical moments of protest. In 1789, the French Revolution occurred, during which at least one march was led by women, and the uproar of the people led to revolutionize the French constitution. As such, the mention of 1789 takes the poem to France, in Europe, and expands the site yet again. Additionally, these dates may divide our attention over several different sites as well, since some years evoke several historically significant events. The year of 1929, for example, generally denotes the crash of the United States stock market, an event that caused an immense rise in poverty and led to unrest and uproar among U.S. citizens. However, since the dates are preceded by the phrase "The women and the women-identified of," another event comes to mind, namely, one that explicitly concerned women (139). In 1929, there was a period of unrest in British Nigeria when protests broke out. During November, what is now known as the Aba Women's Riots[10] took place. Still, among those impoverished by the stock market's crash were many

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[10] During the 'Aba Riots,' "thousands of women converged" and "chanted, danced, sang songs of ridicule and demanded" change (van Allen 12). Acts of activism that resonate in the previous

women – how is one to decide which event is represented in the poem? The fact that these dates carry such ambiguity emphasizes, once more, the complex web of relations that is sewn together by "If You Were a Bluebird." Through the elaborate and multidimensional interrelatedness of everything – of beings, sites and dates, and the ecosystem each dimension creates – the poem comes to represent, rather than an imagined ecosystem or microcosm, a complete biosphere. That is to say; the worldwide sum of all ecosystems. The ecosystem to encompass us all.

2.4   Relations of Complicity

Finally, in the process of the poem's extensive internalization of the principle of relation and exposing the interrelatedness of it all, it, additionally, explicates the ways in which every contender in the biosphere is complicit to the environmental crisis our *oikos* is in. For example, the speaker asserts that the principle of relation is relevant to the making of the list, "[b]ecause it was with the principle of relation that the Niger Delta [and the Kuwait Bay and the Golf of Mexico] came / to teem" (11-12, 34-35, 52-53). 'Coming to teem' means rather to pour down, or come down in abundance, while teeming means "present in large numbers" (Hornby 1590). Since these sites are places of environmental crisis, 'coming to teem' can be understood as a negative development within the togetherness of ecosystems. Rather, it is through the principle of relation that these places have been diminished to the unhealthy ecosystems they are today. Therefore, the principle of relation demonstrates that the culpability can be attributed to the relations of these ecosystems, which, as the previous section showed, encompasses all interrelations. As such, the principle of relations becomes the principle of *relations of complicity*.

By establishing a communal complicity to the ecological dilemmas, both the group and the individual are spurred on to assume responsibility for the issue at hand. "[I]n the light of the principle of relation," "individual guilt and collective guilt are not mutually exclusive, and … the

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passage of the poem. In their protest, these women took part in an act of dwelling as they worked to maintain a viable habitat for themselves.

individual suffers on account of the sins of the community, and … the community suffers on account of the sins of the individual" [11] (Freed 1490). This is why the poem's extrapolation from micro dwellings to macro dwellings is paramount to engaging the reader. It construes a sense of being on equal footing to advancing and solving the problem. The communal and individual culpability is further motivated by the circular motion the poem enters on the last pages. Arguably, the groundwork for this circle is laid in lines 62-84, where the speaker plays with interchanging the words "waiting" and "wanting," demonstrating a shift from passivity to desire (J. Spahr, "If You Were" 62, 81). "I am waiting. / Said this out loud. / Said to no one in particular. / Said we are waiting … Waiting to be complete … Waiting for the impossible… Wanting to be complete" (62-65,68,74, 79). From the singular 'I' that addresses no one in particular – which, from its *unspecificity* becomes rather an address to all – to the first person plural, the we, encompassing us all, waiting for a complete or restored ecosystem, waiting for the impossible. The waiting is then converted into wanting, and to be wanting is to lack, as well as to long for. Longing for that which you lack constitutes a motivation for bringing about change. This is when we arrive at the circular motion that ends the poem. Because since the "us" is wanting, 'we' must come to action, therefore we are "[w]anting to be coming" changemakers, to gather the possibilities of change (62). This leads to a coming together and taking charge of habitats, and to a coming to the action of dwelling as we "[occupy] airstrips, helicopter pads, oil storage areas, docks" and we sing "all day and night" and we are "[d]ancing ridicule too" as we

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[11] A notion that resonates in the title. "If You Were a Bluebird" is a direct copy from the country song by the same name, originally by Butch Hancock, though made relevant to Spahr by Emmylou Harris (J. Spahr, "Book Notes"). In her own words, the song is about "being there for someone no matter what they are and no matter what they might do" ("Book Notes"). This agrees with the idea of the community and the individual sharing in the load of responsibility, of guilt, in that they will help and support each other no matter what they are and what they might do or have done. The intertextuality serves as another dimension of space in space, micro dwelling in macro dwelling. The title, as it is a reference to the title for Harris' country song, becomes a micro dwelling in the poem. Moreover, the fourth poem of the collection, "Calling You Here," shares the syntax from the song. As such, these two poems share a connection that levers the principle of relation between these works in the same collection to another level. This is another example of how intricately bound together Spahr has made her poetry's biosphere.

chant "threatening songs," just like the Aba women did during the Women's War in 1929[12] (126-29). We come to action and to revolt by gathering ourselves, by coming together, and by seizing and then occupying our dwellings (122-23, 126). These occupying beings are then beings of activism, and as they accumulate in numbers – "[f]rom four hundred one day to four thousand the next … [b]ut not stopping then" – the beings of activism return to complicit beings as the circular motion of the passage comes to a close. These beings, namely, are "[t]raveling through the circuits that already exist. / Traveling with the ease of oil tankers" (153-54). By using oil tankers as a vehicle for their mobility, they become part of the industry that is destroying nature, particularly the sites named in this poem. To adhere to this argument, the poem ends with sites that are interfered with by oil rigs: "From Banias in Syria, Tripoli, Ceyhan in Turkey … Through Das Island an Jebel dhanna. / Arjuna, Balongan, and Cinta, and Widuri" (155-60).

The *oikos* of "If You Were a Bluebird" concludes with the ultimate perpetrators of the eco-disasters that are addressed in the collection. After the uproar from the activist beings in lines 62 to 84, it is confrontational that these oil rigs, the oil industry, is connected even to them from the principle of relation. Finally, all beings remain complicit to the deterioration of our ecosystems, and it can only be asserted that the reader is complicit, as well.

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[12] These phrases are taken almost verbatim from van Allen's article about the Aba Women's Riots. "The women chanted, danced, sang song of ridicule … Prisons were broken into and prisoners released at a few locations. Attacks were made on sixteen Native Courts, and most of them were broken up or burned" (van Allen 12). The reference to wearing palm leaves may refer to the reason for the riot: "the women were aroused by a rumor that they would be taxed at a time of declining profits from the pam products trade, and that they believed themselves to be immune from danger because they thought British soldiers would not fire on women" (van Ellen 12). The conflict was enticed by the laws concerning palm products, moreover, wearing palm leaves in a riot, thereby not wearing armor, ironicizes the women's bravura in thinking that they would not be shot by the soldiers. In a naïve vulnerability both the women from the poem and the Aba women take part in acts of protest.

2.5 Conclusion

"If You Were a Bluebird" offers matters of fact to address matters of concern, and creates an imagined ecosystem based on direct phrases retrieved from reality. It is in this projected reality that the matters of concern are more profoundly felt. In addition, the way these matters of fact are sewn together argues for an overwhelming connectedness, and the interrelations that come to the surface underline the complicity we all share in the wellbeing of our ecosystems, and ultimately our biosphere.

3 **"Dynamic Positioning"**

3.1   Introduction

The collection's fifth poem, "Dynamic Positioning," uses fact and site specificity to discuss the tragedy that would become one of the largest environmental disasters in United States history. In seventy-six couplets, each containing ten syllables, the poem reimagines in free verse the colossal disaster of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, a rig that, at the time, was being leased by oil and gas company BP, a global superpower in the oil industry. After the failure of the blowout preventer,[13] a horrific explosion ensued, which caused the death of eleven crewmembers. Due to the massive amount of water that was used to extinguish the fire, the vessel succumbed to the weight pressure and, as it sunk, the pipe connected to the oil source ruptured. This led to the worst oil leak that the United States has ever seen, lasting for nearly three months. In addition to the victims on board, the oil leak led to a state of emergency for the ecosystems of the southern coastal states of the United States. The Deepwater Horizon disaster "is a recent example of an occasion generating exceptional social disruption for ecologies, individuals, communities, and regions" (Eargle et al. xi). In the face of this disruption, "Dynamic Positioning" reclaims the Deepwater Horizon oil spill to construct an imagined ecosystem and uses it to design a site of resistance. In the process of laying out the facts, the poem explicates the

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[13] The blowout preventer (BOP) played a "critical factor in the causal chain of events that contributed to" the explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon (Bly 141). The BOP failed "to isolate the wellbore prior to and after the explosions" (141).

relations that led to the oil leak. Relations that will prove to encompass all of us, thereby instigating our and, specifically, the reader's culpability. In the disruption of these relations, "Dynamic Positioning" establishes a site of resistance and engages us in the act of assuming responsibility.

3.2   Complex Web of Relations

The poem begins with six (real) moments of operation that ultimately led to the blowout preventer's failure, which was the final cause for the explosion on board. Each operation is initiated by the statement "It is," which gives each operation a sense of agency and culpability to the tragic outcome (J. Spahr, "Dynamic Positioning" 1, 4, 8, 11, 14 & 19). In each phrase, 'it' refers to those moments of operation that in the execution of their task either sabotaged the procedure or disabled the correction of the procedure. For example, "the thirty-six inch tube, / A casing, that extends down to allow/ The drill and bit to be rotated there," refers to the contraption that leads the oil from the rig to the oil source (4-6). Due to a discrepancy between inside and outside pressure within this casing, the drill pipe curved out of place and ruptured, which ultimately led to the pipe leaking millions of barrels of oil into the marginal sea. An insufficient amount of cement had been put between the drill pipe and the casing, a shortage that caused the difference in pressure between the different layers. So, another culprit is appointed: "it is a cement that / Fills in the casing so the drill pipe stays / Unmoving, stable" (11-13). By asserting these pivotal procedural moments, the causal relations are exposed that influence the pollution of the oil rig's habitat and that of the ecosystems surrounding it. The six procedural moments the poem begins with are complicit to the explosion and leak, but they are but a part of the whole. The poem continues: "There are all / These variables. Various valves. Pressures … Claims. / Humans" (21-24). Although a multitude of reports have been written and extensive research has been done – many 'claims' have been made – to determine what caused the disaster, the culpable variables include relations beyond this summation of quantifiable information.

Pressure comes from outside of the oil rig, for example, from society's reliance on fossil fuels. A fact that is often dismissed to the outskirts of our consciences. "The importance of fossil fuels in defining modernity has stood in inverse relationship to their presence in our cultural and social imaginaries," and this imbalance "comes as a surprise to almost everyone who engages in critical explorations of energy today" (Wilson et al. 5). As such, the poem ironically emphasizes the procedural moments, because arguing that "[i]t is a thick column," "a cement" or a "blowout preventer" negates the complex web of relations that precedes it (J. Spahr, "Dynamic Positioning" 8, 11 & 19).

Furthermore, the oceanic zones and the layers of the earth penetrated by the Deepwater Horizon drill are summed up to give a sense of how extensive the ecosystem, or rather, how extensive the number of ecosystems, the oil extraction interferes with actually is. The oil well "went through / Five thousand feet, through the abyssal zones, / The epipelagic with its sunlight / The mesopelagic with its twilight / The Bathypelagic with its midnight" (30-34). Again, the use of exacting language, even scientific vernacular, illustrates the specificity that proves the realist perspective of the poem. By calling out the exact layers, the dwelling is exacted and, as such, we are confronted with the ecosystem, one we are not accustomed to being confronted with. As the drill reaches deeper waters, it loses light and, therefore, the act of drilling happens in obscurity. The ocean's depths hide the ecosystem's infiltration from plain sight, which enables bystanders, though they are participants in this ecosystem, to close their eyes and minds to the deterioration and depletion of our nature. "Dynamic Positioning" reveals the ecosystem that is victimized by the sustainment of our unsustainable habits.

The denial of responsibility, and the immovability of human's consciences is reiterated by the title. The dynamic positioning system is a computer controlled system that automatically maintains a vessel's position by using its own propellers and thrusters. Instead of responding to the circumstances in a collaborative manner, dynamic positioning enables one to remain in the same place no matter what changes in it environment. As such, it ensures that one, like the drill

pipe, is "unmoving, stable, in this ever moving sea" (13). In a w, this demonstrates a stubborn attitude, one that is reflected in several aspects of the poem. First of all, as the fifth poem in *That Winter the Wolf Came,* the poem maintains a steady position in the middle of the nine selected works. The centrality of the poem provides it with a strong anchorage in the *oikos* of the collection. Furthermore, despite shifts in rhythm and pace, the poem remains bordered in the constrictive form of couplets. The structure of the poem, albeit mostly formally, illustrates a sense of rigidity. Moreover, in the final lines, the people in charge are called out by their names: "Anthony Brian Hayward. Steven / L. Newman. David Lesar watched. And / Susan Birnbaum too watching"[14] (150-52). These ultimate perpetrators are then accused of the passive act of "watching," which illustrates their stubborn immobility in the face of environmental crisis (152). They were unrelenting in their pursuit for oil and, through a system similar to dynamic positioning, they ensured that the gathering of oil would continue as they navigated precautions and lobbied for nature to serve human beings to its depletion. "An environmental / Impact and blowout plan declared to be / Not necessary" (50-52).

Moreover, the speaker inflicts this passivity upon themselves, as well. "I watched it then burn on a / Flat screen" (149-50). This recapitulates the notion of equal parts, as it levels the speaker, the regular bystander, with the executive tycoons and argues that all contributed to this outcome. The poem does not discriminate between the authoritative being and the being that failed to come to action. Both are scalded to carry the weight of responsibility on their shoulders. The connection to the stable drill pipe becomes a telling one, because like the pipe, anthropocentric rigidity is sure to rupture at one point and destroy nature irrevocably.

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[14] These names belong to executive players of the companies and governmental organs that were involved in the disaster. At the time of the explosion, Hayward was the chief executive of BP, Newman was the chief executive of Transocean (the company that owned the oil rig), Lesar was chairman to Halliburton (a company that provides products and services to the energy industry) and Susan Birnbaum was the director of the Minerals Management Service.

3.3   A Site of Disruption

Although the poem takes form as a rigidly structured assembly of lines, the use of line-breaks and the sporadic omission of verbs of action from sentences work towards a disruption of order. The enjambments accelerate the pace and cause a disruption to the sentences and pace and, as such, they demand attention. Sentences are often cut off halfway, or even in the middle of a word, an act that is supported by the maintenance of ten syllables per line. For example, the sentence "Then sea- / Water is pumped" breaks the word 'seawater' apart (72-73). In doing this, the meaning is split into sea and water, which stretches the meaning of the first part, 'sea,' to also signify its phonetical expression. 'Then see' is sounded out as the poem is read aloud, a telling action since it is preceded by the ominous statement "Then drill pipe pressure high again" (72). This threatening situation gives cause for a reassessment of the situation, and 'to see' it more thoroughly. Instead, the separation of 'sea' and 'water' is bridged by a hyphen, and juxtaposes the preliminary taking heed by proceeding to pump seawater on top of the pressure. "Then drill pipe pressure high again. Then sea- / Water is pumped. Kill line full" (72-73). The line-break foreshadows the recklessness of the action and disrupts the matter-of-fact report style that the concise and structured lines mimic. The deconstruction of the facts can promote empathy and generate a deeper understanding of the situation at hand. Pointing didactically to environmental crises is not likely to generate change, rather,

> engaging [people] with a story about energy, about our demand for it and the limits of its availability, and about the consequences of its use – at once geopolitical and environmental – shifts the frame of reference; it moves the analysis from the abstraction of the climate to the reality of the gas tank. It enables us to have a discussion. (Wilson et al. 4)

Instead of the bleak summation of facts, on closer inspection Spahr engages through the appropriation of facts and dismantling the hidden, underlying structures. The deconstruction of the matters of fact lead to engage our conscience, and establish an ideal space for a critical assessment of our responsibility towards nature.

Another example of this is the line-break that occurs when the poem announces the death of the eleven crewmembers. "What happens next ends with eleven / Dead" (J. Spahr, "Dynamic Positioning" 132-33). This sentence draws attention to itself because the true information is isolated in the next line. By locating "Dead," with a capital 'd,' no less, on the beginning of a new line, the suspense of the sentence is fueled. While reading the sentence, we are lured into its message and the syntax antagonizes us into rushing to the next line. Once we get there, we are blown to a full stop by the weight of the capitalized announcement of death. In the disruption of order, Spahr captures her reader and forces them to stop and consider the relations of the complex web that leads to the oil rig disaster.

Finally, the separation of bystander and perpetrator is demolished in the last lines, exposing relations of complicity in all beings. The interrelatedness of all beings reveals, once more, the equal parts all play in the ecological system. After giving tribute to all human victims by naming them in a list of isolated sentences, they are connected to the rest of us by way of our shared relation to oil. "I will not tell / You their lives, their loves, their young children, their / Relationship to oil. Our oil" (143-45). The victims were connected to oil in the way that they relied on it for their livelihood. Likewise, however, they were connected to oil in the sense that we are all connected and dependent on oil, in our fossil fueled existence. It is our need for "our oil," that led to the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon. Additionally, the relations of complicity are exposed when the "I" is positioned right in between the victims and the executive perpetrators, i.e. Hayward et al. (148). After another list of tributes to non-fatal victims, their suffering is juxtaposed by the survival and non-suffering of others: "I did / Not die. I watched it then burn on a / Flat screen … And Susan Birnbaum too, watching" (148-52). In a complex web of relations, the 'I' is put in the same position as the executive perpetrators. Moreover, the 'I' is said to have 'done.' Similar to the previously mentioned line-break that cut off 'seawater,' the separation of "I did" and "Not die" reveals the 'I' to assume responsibility (148-49). In these closing lines, passivity proves a harmful state of being, a way of being that only contributes to the

deterioration of the ecosystem. Rather, it promotes an activist way of being, one that causes disruption and exposes the relations of complicity in pursuit of bringing about change.

3.4   Conclusion

In a structured and orderly *poiesis*, "Dynamic Positioning" reveals the rigidity of current systems within our *oikos*. Through the disruption of this rigidity, Spahr dismantles the interrelations and retaliates against the passivity of beings. By doing this, the whole is addressed and invited to assume responsibility. In conclusion, "Dynamic Positioning" engages the reader to generate change in the harmful systems that pollute and endanger our ecosystem.

4 Spahr's Ecopoetry in Ecocritical Discourse

4.1   Introduction

The poems "If You Were a Bluebird" and "Dynamic Positioning" (henceforth referred to as "IYWAB" and "DP," respectively), are incredibly rich in meaning, as they signify truths on so many levels. Through the creation of complex webs of relations, Spahr denotes a strong sense of shared complicity. The webs of relations constitute ecosystems of all kinds of beings, and all sorts of locations, and, as such, construct ecological communities that in their shared liability become collaborators in the act of dwelling. In this chapter, I will repurpose the findings from the analyses garnered in the previous two chapters, and apply them to ecocritical discourse.

4.2 Systems-Oriented Poetry

Literary activism persuades individuals to contribute to generating systematic change. Spahr's poetry is heavily systems-oriented in that it constantly describes and denotes underlying relations. This is in agreement with ecocritical discourse, which, in essence, shows a shift "from an *object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented* culture. Here change emanates, not from things, but from the *way things are done*" (Burnham 31). Burnham says that the "priorities of the present age revolve around the problems of organization. A systems viewpoint is focused on the creation of stable, on-going relationships between organic and non-organic systems … All living situations must be treated in

the context of a systems hierarchy of values" (31). Paramount to Burnham's argument is the systems-oriented art by Hans Haacke. Since the mid-1960's, Haacke has produced controversial work, often exposing systems of power and influence. "In a systems context, invisibility, or invisible parts, share equal importance with things seen" (35). For example, Haacke's *Condensation Cube* represents the notion of processes that are put into action beyond human perception. The artwork consists of a transparent acrylic cube, filled with a small amount of water. Due to temperature differences, the water evaporates and condensates, creating a mapping of waterdrops on the sides of the cube and exposing the invisible variables at work. Burnham says that boundary situations are central to Haacke's thinking:

> A 'sculpture' that physically reacts to its environment is no longer to be
> regarded as an object. The range of outside factors affecting it, as well as
> its own radius of action, reach beyond the space it materially occupies. It
> thus merges with the environment in a relationship that is better
> understood as a 'system' of interdependent processes. These processes
> evolve without the viewer's empathy. He becomes a witness. A system is
> not imagined, it is real. (Haacke qtd. in Burnham 35)

Condensation Cube reveals the underlying structures and relations at work, without determining them directly. Rather, the system of relations is implied by the outcome. Similarly, Spahr's poetry plays with the visible and invisible structures that are inherent to the (eco)systems that are described in "TYWAB" and "DP." Both poems have proven to be built upon the notion of systemic togetherness. As the poems magnify and minimize our view, they conjure intricate descriptions of all these different kinds of dwelling, both underlying and overreaching. The poems explicate the micro dwelling of the "mudskipper" and the "detritevars," and, by proxy, demonstrate how our society relates to the ecological crises discussed (J. Spahr, "TYWAB" 30 & "DP" 37).

For example, "TYWAB" conjures a system consisting of a series of beings (bird, fish,

monkey etc.). In their ways of being, these beings act both individually and in collaboration with each other, and their surroundings. For example, "the mudskipper [digs] a deep burrow then [hides] in it / during high tide, a polygonal territory surrounded by dams, and / [defends it] against rivals, yet also [shares] with digging crabs" (J. Spahr, "TYWAB" 30-33). The mudskipper is in connection to fellow beings as well as its surroundings, building and maintaining its own habitat within the overarching habitat of its ecosystem. "DP" creates shared ties as well, but does this in a more abstract way. For example, by leading the reader through line-breaks, pulling them in from one line to the next, connections are constantly forged between one step to the next. In the following lines, the poem guides us through all the different layers, both geologically and authoritative, that one has to go through before arriving at the oil well.

> This well, Macondo well, was drilled by
> Deepwater Horizon and it went through
>
> Five thousand feet, through the abyssal zones,
> The epipelagic with its sunlight
>
> The mesopelagic with its twilight
> The bathypelagic with its midnight
>
> Then where the sea meets floor, deep ocean,
> A blowout preventer there with the fish (J. Spahr, "DP" 29-36)

The passage exemplifies both geological and social mobility in "DP": we are brought down from the oil rig to the depths of the ocean, "where sea meets floor," and in the same breath we are transported into the ecosystem that thrives at that level (35). In the "deep ocean, / A blowout preventer there with the fish / The darker fish, the large detritevars / That feed on the drizzle of the moulted / Exoskeletens" (35-39). Even amid the obscurity of the bottom of the ocean, a rich system of beings thrives. The process of Spahr's poetic activism, then, functions to expose structures at work within certain political and social systems, taking into account factors from

outside as well as the innerworkings of its own system. Once these invisible structures are made evident, one enters a position of renegotiation of these structures. In the case of *Condensation Cube*, for example, once we know the water rises due to temperature differences, we can decide to control the heat exterior to the cube. Likewise, Spahr's poetry, exposes the system to its reader, as well as incorporates a sense of community from outside to expose the inside community of the poem/reader relationship. "TYWAB" and "DP" make "innovative use of public space," whether it is through the exertion of geological or social mobility, "to address contested issues of sociopolitical and cultural significance" and they promote "community participation as a means of effecting social change and galvanizing citizen dissent" (Frostig 51). Like activism, the systems at work in these poems intentionally contribute to "the construction of new political or social consciousness" (Mesch 2).

4.3 Entanglement of Facts

Ecocritical discourse understands that "nature and culture are now intertwined beyond our disentangling" (Head 57). Although we have proven ourselves "ostensibly successful at regulating [nature]," human affairs remain fundamentally "subject to regulation by the environment" (Buell qtd. in Head 58). By incorporating nature as nature in both poems, Spahr introduces "nonhuman environment … as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (58). The fervent use of facts and realism in both "TYWAB" and "DP" puts forth the argument that all beings are equal, and that the "human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest" (58).

"TYWAB," for example, "began with a list," but sets the scene by introducing animals (J. Spahr, "TYWAB" 1). It is not until after the wanting for an "us" being "together" that the poem works towards mentioning human beings by introducing "women" (107, 120). It is not until the whole is relevant that humans come into play, almost as an afterthought. The taxonomical style that is used to describe the animals gives a sense of factual realism, and the delayed mention of

the human in this summation, dislocates the human being from the center of the ecosystem. These claims of realism function in such a way that they generate a confrontation with our deceived sense of self in the ecosystem and the true interrelatedness of all beings. Moreover, it projects "[h]uman accountability to the environment" as "part of the text's ethical orientation" (Buell in Head 58). As such, the human's decentralization from the web of ecological relations is construed as fact in itself, and motivates to propel this way of thinking into our way of being.

Similarly, "DP" confronts the reader with the use of facts surrounding the BP oil disaster. In a bombardment of technical operations and summations of victims and perpetrators, we are forced to see the interrelatedness that led up to the oil spill, and, furthermore, we are moved to contemplate the ecological systems that reach beyond that of the oil spill. In the exposure of complicity, we come to see clearly that we must embark on action. Even by reaching just one reader per poem read, a movement can still be ignited. For poems touch our full humanness, and they "quicken awareness and bolster respect for the ravaged resilient earth we live on" (Felstiner xiii). With language that resembles someone logging the situation into the records, we are given a manual to the system, one that represents the overlaying systems of humans and the self-importance they are founded on.

Both poems create an intimate setting, as poetry does, in a direct exchange with the reader. Through this intimate setting, an act of activism is initiated because the message pierces through the reader's conscience. "Response starts with individuals," and "it is individual persons that poems are spoken by and spoken to. One by one, the will to act may rise within us. Because we are what the beauty and force of poems reach toward, we've a chance to recognize and lighten our footprint in a world where all of nature matters vitally" (Felstiner xiii).

4.4 Conclusion

Spahr's "If You Were a Bluebird" and "Dynamic Positioning" can be placed within the ecocritical discourse in hat they both make use of essentially ecocritical methods to expose the

problematic interrelationship between the anthropocentric human and their ecosystem. In the act

of activism, these poems seek to engage others in working towards changing the current state of

affairs. Activism starts with the individual, and the medium of poetry creates an intimate setting,

an ideal setting, to pierce though the reader's consciousness. As such, poetry is the ideal setting

for generating change in the individual's way of being. It is "[a] way of happening, a mouth"

(Auden 48).

Conclusion

The aim for this thesis was to consider in what way ecocritical poetry can function as an act of activism, and to what extent it is able to generate change in its reader. I explored this question by analyzing two poems from Juliana Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came*. Through a close reading of both "If You Were a Bluebird" and "Dynamic Positioning," I researched the ways in which these poems expose human culpability in environmental crises, and how they might engage the reader to reassess their role in the whole. In chapter 1, I provided a theoretical background that contextualized poetry in the activist and political field, I defined ecocritical discourse and introduced Juliana Spahr as an (ecocritical) activist. In chapters 2 and 3, the analyses of both poems proved that each described rich and multidimensional geological, ecological and social landscapes. Through the integration of factual information in the poetic form, Spahr transformed matters of fact into matters of concern, ultimately engaging the reader by exposing their relation of complicity to the crises at hand.

  In "If You Were a Bluebird," a taxonomy is proposed that puts forth beings existing for the mere reason of being, instead of in service of human beings. As such, it decentralizes the human as they are put in equal position to other beings in the complex web of relations that make up an ecosystem. This propels the ecocritical view that humans should no longer perpetuate an anthropocentric way of being, but, rather, consider the interrelatedness of all beings in nature and foster nature's preservation. The poem demonstrates this interrelatedness by connecting multiple beings to each other, as well as connecting the way they each dwell in their habitats. This, ultimately, provokes the reader to reassess their own way of dwelling and propels

them to improve their ecological way of being by decentralizing the human self. In a similar way, "Dynamic Positioning" uses rigid language to invoke a sense of reality, a sense of realness, and uses this imagined reality to demonstrate how everything works in connection to one another. After making explicit the procedures that led to the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon, it is in the equality between victim, bystander an perpetrator that "Dynamic Positioning" confronts the reader most and provokes recognition of the reader's complicity to the environmental crises that unfolded during those fateful months in 2010.

Both poems lay bare the structures of systems, and their systems-oriented narrative reflects the procedure of ecocritical discourse. It reveals the underlying interrelations that both create and maintain the current condition of our ecosystems. By deconstructing these systems, Spahr conjures a web of complicity among all beings, one that surpasses the boundaries of the poem. By referring to real situations, people and beings, Spahr's poetry calls upon the reader to include themselves in the ecosystem of the poem, and the poem becomes part of the readers reality. As such, the reader is engaged to empathize with the ecological status quo and invoked to generate change and improvement in their way of being in order to preserve and maintain the ecosystem. As such, ecopoetry can function as a meaningful contributor to ecocritical discourse as the spark that ignites change for the better.

For further research, I would propose a more extensive close reading of both poems, in addition to analyzing the other poems from *That Winter the Wolf Came.* It is an ecocritical and, overall, political collection, and boasts an extensive interrelatedness. Each poem demonstrates significant overlap with reality, as well as many poems can be regarded in relation to each other. Moreover, a comparative study between ecopoetry and other works of literary activism might provide a broader framework for the exchange between poem and reader. The penetrating performance of "Mike Check" by Suheir Hammad, for example, confronts in such an immediate way that the listener is forced to pay attention and to reassess life (after 9/11). In what way does her performance operate similar to that of reading Spahr's poetry?

Furthermore, due to the limiting scope of this thesis, I was not able to study the relation of ecocritical poetry to other modes of arts activism. An analysis between ecocritical genres, e.g. conceptual artworks and poetry, might prove to be insightful. For example, Marco Evaristtii's conceptual artwork like *Helena* and *Pink Geiser* both incur upon the spectator a strong sense of complicity to the destruction of nature. An interpretation of the relation between the artwork and the spectator might contribute to a deeper understanding of the construct of ecopoetry. Since ecopoetry is a relatively young genre, there remains plenty of territory yet to be tackled. I can only hope that this thesis may have contributed in some way, and that it has brought light to a previously dark nook of the field. In all, I am convinced that poetry can be fundamentally part of generating change. It is a way of happening, it is a mouth.

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