“If we have songs to sing, we should sing them now”: The Ecopoetry of Karen Solie

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Abstract

This thesis explores the development of Karen Solie's ecopoetry across her six poetry collections: *Short Haul Engine* (2001), *Modern and Normal* (2005), *Pigeon* (2009), *The Living Option: Selected Poems* (2013), *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out* (2015), and *The Caiplie Caves* (2019). By situating her work within the context of prominent ecopoetic and ecocritical theories, the thesis reveals how Solie's works contribute to the ecopoetic project and resist dominant cultural modes of thought. It argues that Solie creates her own holistic vision of the environment that deconstructs humanity's assumption of dominance over the natural world. Chapter One discusses how her early ecopoems from *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal* foreground the strength of nature and depict it as a site beyond human comprehension. By capturing the unique lives of individual creatures and showing how brutal landscapes control and change their residents, these works challenge the false belief that humanity is separate from and superior to nature—a notion that she believes allows people to justify their abuses of the natural world. Chapter Two focuses on the depiction of toxic human endeavours in *Pigeon*, *The Living Option*, and *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out* and suggests that in these works, Solie develops the connection between ecologies and politics and critiques the hubris that encourages our abuses of the natural world. Finally, Chapter Three examines *The Caiplie Caves*, wherein her ecopoetic canvas becomes more self-reflexive but also expands to consider the genesis and long-term consequences of human ventures that harm biodiversity. In Solie's poetry collections, nature is at once beautiful, dangerous, a site for self-exploration, and a victim of human cruelty. It is a distinct entity, but it also reflects our prejudices and destructive tendencies.

Résumé

Le présent mémoire explore le développement de l'écopoésie de Karen Solie à travers ses six recueils de poésie : *Short Haul Engine* (2001), *Modern and Normal* (2005), *Pigeon* (2009), *The Living Option: Selected Poems* (2013), *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out* (2015) et *The Caiplie Caves* (2019). En situant son travail dans le contexte d'importantes théories écopoétiques et écocritiques, le mémoire révèle comment les œuvres de Solie contribuent au projet écopoétique et résistent aux modes de pensée culturels dominants. L'auteure soutient que Solie crée sa propre vision holistique de l'environnement, laquelle déconstruit l'hypothèse de la domination de l'humanité sur le monde naturel. Le premier chapitre explique comment ses premiers écopoèmes de *Short Haul Engine* et *Modern and Normal* mettent en valeur la force de la nature et la décrivent comme un site au-delà de la compréhension humaine. En captant la vie unique de créatures individuelles et en montrant comment les paysages brutaux contrôlent et changent leurs habitants, ces œuvres remettent en question la fausse croyance selon laquelle l'humanité est séparée de la nature et y est supérieure — notion qui, selon elle, permet aux gens de justifier leurs abus du monde naturel. Le deuxième chapitre se concentre sur la description des activités humaines toxiques dans *Pigeon*, *The Living Option* et *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out* et suggère que dans ces œuvres, Solie développe le lien entre l'écologie et la politique et y critique l'orgueil qui encourage nos abus du monde naturel. Enfin, le troisième chapitre examine *The Caiplie Caves*, dans lequel sa toile écopoétique devient plus auto-réfléchie mais s'élargit également pour considérer la genèse et les conséquences à long terme des entreprises humaines qui nuisent à la biodiversité. Dans les recueils de poésie de Solie, la nature est à la fois

belle, dangereuse, un lieu d’auto-exploration et une victime de la cruauté humaine. C'est une entité distincte, mais elle reflète aussi nos préjugés et nos tendances destructrices.

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List of Abbreviations

CC	Solie, Karen. *The Caiplie Caves*. House of Anansi Press, 2019.
LI	Solie, Karen. *The Living Option: Selected Poems*. Bloodaxe Books, 2013.
MN	Solie, Karen. *Modern and Normal*. 2005. Brick Books, 2014.
P	Solie, Karen. *Pigeon*. House of Anansi Press, 2009.
RI	Solie, Karen. *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out*. House of Anansi Press, 2015.
SHE	Solie, Karen. *Short Haul Engine*. 2001. Brick Books, 2016.
"Sing It"	Solie, Karen. "Sing It Again." *Poetry London*, no. 94, 2019, https://poetrylondon.co.uk/sing-it-again/.

Introduction

Since the 1960s and 70s, ecocriticism—also known as green studies—has emerged as a new praxis of literary theory that, broadly speaking, addresses "how humans relate to nonhuman nature or the environment in literature" (Johnson 7). Scholars like Pippa Marland suggest that the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* marked the beginning of "the kind of environmental consciousness that provides the backdrop to ecocriticism" (847). But as a field of literary study, ecocriticism was slow to emerge. Although other works arose alongside *Silent Spring* that embodied early forms of ecocritical writing, "It was not until 1992 that the first professional organization of ecocritics, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment" in the USA was formed, "followed in 1993 by the founding of its journal, ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment" (847). In 1998, another similar organization was founded in the UK. Marland suggests that one of the factors influencing the slow progress of the discipline was that problems with the environment were seen as exclusively a scientific issue.

But since the 1990s, the field of ecocriticism has burgeoned: as Loretta Johnson writes, it "has entered academic course lists worldwide, along with the creation of interdisciplinary academic faculty positions to teach them" (7). Ecocritic Peter Barry added a chapter on the subject to the second edition of his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* and lists "what ecocritics do," which consists of reading literature from an ecocentric perspective, applying ecological issues to the natural world, focusing on nonfiction and environmental writing that depicts nature, and demonstrating an appreciation for ethical positions towards the nonhuman, natural world (qtd. in Johnson 7).

Yet Barry correctly writes that ecocriticism "has no universal model" (Johnson 7). Rather, ecocriticism is an umbrella term for a range of critical approaches "that explore the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the non-human, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere" (Marland 846). In part, Marland writes, this breadth is due to "the enormity of the subject." As Timothy Clark writes, "The 'environment,' after all, is, ultimately, 'everything'" (qtd. in Marland 846). But on the other hand, Clark argues, such a large scope is necessary: "the unprecedented challenge of things like climate change or overpopulation—issues at the same time of morality, ethics, biology, 'animal rights,' statistics, geography and politics—may be the need, literally, to think everything, even to think everything at once" (*Cambridge Introduction* 203).

Yet many ecocritics have attempted to narrow and further define what ecocriticism and ecoliterature constitute. Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrard identify a conceptual divide among leading ecopoets and ecopoetic theorists. According to both authors, thinkers like Angus Fletcher, Robinson Jeffers, and others conceive of a branch of ecopoetics that Lidström and Garrard call "ecophenomenological poetry," which draws on "Romantic and deep ecology traditions" to offer "descriptions and appreciation of non-human nature" that "heighten individual readers' awareness of their natural surroundings" (37-8). This association of ecocritical works with Romanticism is not uncommon. Many scholars suggest that the distinct rise in environmental writing through the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries acts as a precursor to contemporary green studies. For instance, Laurence Coupe's foundational *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* includes essays from William Blake,

William Wordsworth, Thoreau, and other writers of the Romantic period alongside contemporary scholarly analyses of ecocritical works.

However, many scholars including Buell take issue with the ecocritical focus of what Lidström and Garrard identify as "ecophenomenological poetry" because of its strict focus on the nonhuman and its neglect of human endeavours. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, Buell "emphasizes as essential and necessary a shift in ecocriticism to study built as well as natural environments" (Johnson 8). Furthermore, in contrast with the ecophenomenological approach, Timothy Clark, Ursula Heise, Hubert Zapf, and others observe what Lidström and Garrard call "environment poetry," which highlights "the changing relationship between human societies and natural environments," particularly within the context of climate change (37). These conflicting efforts to define what constitutes ecocritical literature only emphasize the far-reaching scope of the field.

Loretta Johnson further highlights the extensive nature of ecocriticism. She offers a concise definition for this praxis: because "Eco" comes from the Greek root of *oikos*, which means house, ecocriticism is "the criticism of the 'house,' i.e., the environment, as represented in literature" (7). But though concise, this definition is not simple; as Johnson writes:

> Questions remain: What is the environment? What is nature? Why did the term "environment," which derives from the verb "to environ or surround," change to mean that which is nonhuman? Are not humans natural and a prominent environment in themselves? Where and in what does one live? Ecocriticism is by nature interdisciplinary, invoking knowledge of environmental studies, the natural sciences, and cultural and social studies, all of which play a part in answering the questions it poses. (Johnson 7)

The bounds of ecocriticism, of home, are broad, almost indefinable. At the same time, the very questions that Johnson lists to problematize the linguistic origins of ecocriticism as a term are those that ecocritics and the literature they study attempt to address, answer, challenge, probe. Ecocriticism as a whole asks a variety of questions, which include: "Would a shift toward an ecological perception of nature change the ways humans inhabit the Earth? Do authors impute certain values and make assumptions when they present the environment and nonhuman life in their works? How does one avoid binary oppositions, or should one perceive human nature in an I/it or I/thou relationship" as philosopher Martin Buber posits (Johnson 7; Dancak 45)?

In her ecopoetry, Canadian poet Karen Solie offers her own answers to these questions. Solie's works are numerous: she has published six poetry collections, which include *Short Haul Engine* (2001), *Modern and Normal* (2005), *Pigeon* (2009), *The Living Option* (2013), *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out* (2015), and *The Caiplie Caves* (2019). She has also won many major poetry prizes in Canada, including the Dorothy Livesay Prize, the Griffin Poetry Prize, and the Latner Griffin Writers' Trust Poetry Prize. Having grown up on a farm in the prairies of southern Saskatchewan, near Medicine Hat, Solie often refers to local geographies and institutions in her poetry. But her ecopoems also extend beyond Canada to address environmental issues on a transnational scale. As a poet who frequently tackles the climate crisis in her work, Karen Solie writes ecopoetry that deconstructs the ideological and political forces that influence and produce the crisis.

Despite her significant contributions to the Canadian poetic field, Solie's work has gone largely ignored by contemporary scholarship. Maria Löschnigg is one of the few scholars (if not the sole author) to provide an analysis of Solie's ecopoetry, but her work compares only a couple poems from *Pigeon* to other poets' works. To that end, this thesis redresses the situation by

investigating Solie's ecocritical outlook in all of her poetry collections, and how she answers ecocriticism's central concerns. It does so by analyzing representations of the nonhuman and human world in Solie's poetry collections through the lenses of prominent ecocritical and ecopoetic theories. By situating her work within the context of such theories, the thesis reveals how Solie's works contribute to the ecopoetic project and resist dominant cultural modes of thought. It argues that Solie creates her own holistic vision of the environment that deconstructs humanity's assumption of dominance over the natural world.

The first chapter focuses on *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal*. It draws primarily upon the theories of German biologist Jakob von Uexküll and Christopher Hitt. Uexküll envisions an ecocentric path for science that imagines the world from the perspective of the nonhuman. Hitt's literary theory of the ecological sublime depicts the strength of the natural world and thereby undermines the notion of humanity's pre-eminence on earth. In accordance with both philosophies, Solie's ecopoems in *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal* foreground the power of nature and depict it as a site beyond human understanding. To undermine the binary opposition which holds that humanity is detached from and superior to nature, she captures the distinctive lives of creatures and shows how brutal landscapes—like those of the prairies she grew up in—control their residents.

Chapter Two attends to three of her later poetry collections: *Pigeon*, *The Living Option*, and *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out*. It suggests that in these three works, her ecopoetic canvas shifts. Now, Solie focuses on the depiction of toxic human endeavours to develop the connection between ecologies and politics and critique humanity's abuses of nonhuman nature. To illustrate this shift in Solie's ecocriticism, this chapter draws heavily upon Lynn Keller's concept of poetry of the self-conscious Anthropocene, wherein she suggests that such poems

issue from a growing awareness of the term "Anthropocene" and respond to contemporary environmental changes and problems. It also builds upon Ursula Heise's use of Ulrich Beck's concept of a "risk society," in which she posits that the global risk of the climate crisis allows authors to explore and interrogate the fragile boundaries between humanity and the environment, private and public spheres, and beneficial and harmful machineries. The chapter argues that Solie's works reflect both Keller's and Heise's conceptions of ecoliterature.

Finally, Chapter Three turns to Solie's most recent poetry collection, *The Caiplie Caves*. It suggests that in this collection, Solie's ecopoetic canvas becomes more self-reflexive but also expands to consider the origins and long-term consequences of human ventures that harm biodiversity. *The Caiplie Caves* is unique because its poems revolve around the life of Ethernan—an Irish missionary from the seventh century who withdrew to a cave on the coast of Fife, Scotland—but also extend into the present. When Solie addresses the climate crisis in this collection, she considers environmental concerns both within and beyond Ethernan's lifetime, across vast temporal and geographical scales. With respect to this extensive focus, the chapter approaches the collection through the lens of Timothy Clark's suggestion that ecological thinking attempts to understand how harmful human acts do not disappear, but produce volatile, long-term consequences for both humans and the nonhuman. Chapter Three also employs Ursula Heise's theory of eco-cosmopolitanism, which posits that ecosystems overlap because they all face related, human-induced threats.

All six of these poetry collections respond to the climate crisis in different ways: Solie's early works from *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal* offer descriptions of the natural world that challenge conventional approaches to the environment and undermine anthropocentrism; her later ecopoems in *Pigeon*, *The Living Option*, and *The Road in Is Not the*

Same Road Out focus on humanity's impact on nature by critiquing current human ventures that harm biodiversity, such as the petroleum industry and other fossil fuel extraction processes; and her final collection, *The Caiplie Caves*, suggests that such harmful human endeavours recur throughout human history and catalyze the current crisis. In Solie's ecopoetic oeuvre, then, nature is at once beautiful, dangerous, a site for self-exploration, and a victim of human cruelty. It is a distinct entity, but it also reflects our prejudices and destructive tendencies.

"'Nature' is that which 'feeds our souls'": The Power of the Natural World in *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal*

In his monograph "A stroll through the worlds of animals and men: A picture book of invisible worlds," German biologist Jakob von Uexküll envisions an ecocentric path for biology that focuses on the "unfamiliar worlds" of plant and animal life (319). He advises scholars to abandon the anthropocentric notion that, in contrast with humanity's erudition, animals are mere mechanisms or "objects" (320). Instead, scientists should aim to imagine the world from the perspective of wildlife, which he terms the *"phenomenal world or the self-world of the animal"* (319). Though Uexküll addresses fellow scientists, his desire to inspire wonder for the natural world and see it from a non-anthropocentric angle resonates with the aims of many ecopoets (Lidström and Garrard 38). For instance, John Shoptaw defines ecopoetry as poems "about the nonhuman natural world—wholly or partly, in some way or other, but really and not just figuratively" (Shoptaw 395).

Christopher Hitt expands on Shoptaw's explanation and imagines a new "ecological sublime" for contemporary art, ecoliterature, and ecopoetry that brings the Romantic concept of the sublime into the present. According to Hitt, the Romantic sublime refers to a disorienting or awe-inspiring encounter with a natural object that ultimately reaffirms humanity's pre-eminence over nature (605). An ecological sublime would be similar to its Romantic precursor in that it would continue to present nature as formidable, but offer a "more responsible perspective on our relationship to the environment" by discarding the endorsement of humankind's primacy (605). It would undermine the notion of humanity's dominance over nature and depict the natural world as it is: formidable, and capable of both shaping and harming people's lives (606).

In her early ecopoems from *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal*, Karen Solie draws upon Hitt's and Uexküll's visions of the natural world and the role of ecopoetry. Born in Moose Jaw and having grown up on a farm in southwest Saskatchewan, Solie represents the power of the landscapes that surrounded her in her childhood (*SHE* 83). Her early ecopoetry in *Short Haul Engine* foregrounds the strength of nature and depicts it as a cosmology beyond human comprehension. In contrast, the ecopoems found in *Modern and Normal* are more satirical, more critical in a social sense; they extend her critique of the human/nature divide to the traditional, social divide between men and women to undermine the belief that women and nature are fragile and beholden to men and humanity, respectively. By capturing the unique lives of individual creatures and showing how brutal landscapes control and change their residents, Solie's early poetry collections challenge the false belief that humanity is separate from and superior to nature—a notion that she believes allows people to justify their abuses of the natural world (Fraser).

Two poems in *Short Haul Engine*—"Sturgeon" and "Toad"—emphasize the unseen resilience of wild creatures. In the former poem, Solie depicts the strength of the titular sturgeon, whose prehistoric species has weathered many trials and persisted long after other creatures have died off. Solie's representation of the fish falls in line with its real history: according to Fisheries and Oceans Canada, sturgeons are a "survivor from the age of the dinosaurs over 200 million years ago" ("Sturgeon found" 1). Yet humans fail to recognize the longevity and tenacity of the fish; rather, they attempt to harass, harm, and ridicule it:

> We take our guilts
> to his valley and dump them in,
> give him quicksilver to corrode his fins, weed killer,

gas oil mix, wrap him in poison arms.
Our bottom feeder,
sin-eater.

On an afternoon mean as a hook we hauled him
up to his nightmare of us and laughed
at his ugliness, soft sucker mouth opening,
closing on air that must have felt like ground glass,
left him to die with disdain
for what we could not consume.
And when he began to heave and thrash over yards of rock
to the water's edge and, unbelievably, in,
we couldn't hold him though we were teenaged
and bigger than everything. (*SHE* 16)

People present a new threat to the sturgeon's survival. On the shore, "teenaged" tormentors haul the titular "bottom feeder" out of the water and "up to his nightmare of us." But even before the fish hits the dock, he has borne the brunt of human activity; people interfere with his long life, take their "guilts / to his valley and dump them in, / give him quicksilver to corrode his fins, weed killer," and disfigure him with a permanent "lost lure in his lip" (16).

James Pollock believes that the lure that mars the sturgeon indicates that this poem is Solie's response to Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish," a similar poem about a fish's survival:

Both fish are old warriors: in Bishop's poem the fish has medals and
weapons, in Solie's, armour. And both poems rely on biblical tropes,

> Bishop's from the Old Testament and Solie's from the New: Bishop alludes to the rainbow of Genesis — symbol of God's mercy in ending the flood and promising never to send another — precisely at the climactic moment when the speaker decides to throw the fish back into the water: "every-thing / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! / And I let the fish go". The "victory" Bishop speaks of as "fill[ing] up/the little rented boat" is two-fold; it refers both to her victory in catching the fish (and having mercy on it), and to the fish's victory in surviving. (87)

In Bishop's poem, the speaker is proud of her catch and mercifully releases it. Though she temporarily harms the fish, she celebrates its majesty and respects its right to live. In contrast, Solie's teenagers belittle and attempt to kill the sturgeon: they "laughed / at his ugliness" and "left him to die with disdain / for what we could not consume." They approach the sturgeon from a human, utilitarian perspective; since they cannot make use of the sturgeon's flesh, the youths leave him to perish. Solie's fish appears to be a Christ-like martyr—a "sin-eater"—who is forced to digest human waste and falls victim to these bullies (*SHE* 16). As Pollock argues, like Christ, the sturgeon "is mocked and left to die, only to return to the river miraculously to eat our sins again" (87).

While the lost lure in his lip permanently marks the sturgeon, he endures in spite of it. Unlike Bishop's fish, the sturgeon grants his own release: after the teenagers catch him, he begins "to heave and thrash over yards of rock / to the water's edge and, unbelievably, in." He is a fighter. Although the teenagers believe they are "bigger than everything," the sturgeon has a history that began long before them. As an "ancient grunt of the sea," he bears a prominent "prehistory" prior to humankind. This is a species of fish that has outlived many other creatures.

And ultimately, he survives his abusers: though he is “Inedible” he is also “Indelible,” and the youths therefore cannot “contain / the old current he had for a mind” (*SHE* 16). Over the course of the poem, the sturgeon transitions from an anthropocentric Christian martyr to an ecocentric “pagan river-god, with” this “‘old current’ for a ‘mind,’ ‘his body a muscle called river’” (Pollock 87).

For Pollock, this shift “from Christ to river god is a key to the poem; ultimately, the fish is more a symbol of the resilience of nature than anything else; the last word in the poem, ‘spawn,’ refers not to resurrection or transcendence, but sexual rebirth” (87). Yet the poem also highlights humanity’s failure to recognize this inherent resilience. The sturgeon’s strength and lengthy past elude his tormentors. Instead, they evaluate him based on human values of usefulness and beauty. In their eyes, the sturgeon’s lack of both attributes justifies their cruelty.

The titular amphibian in “Toad” also evades human understanding. Though slight in comparison to people, he proves adaptable and hardy. Whereas Solie introduces her sturgeon in the third person, her toad gives voice to his own experience:

> I am a seed, a world inside
> a tough weathered wrinkling
> of vegetable green.
> Insoluble in liquid space
> of anger, fear, love,
> or other human acids,
> I sit on the bottom like a stone. Shifting
> only slightly with tremor
> or violent wave,

I ride out the winters. (*SHE* 75)

Solie recognizes the hidden inner life and hardiness of the toad: his "tough weathered wrinkling" body conceals "a world." A small yet robust creature, the toad survives and adapts to harsh conditions. He rides "out the winters" like "a stone," "Shifting / only slightly with tremor / or violent wave." But as in "Sturgeon," here, humanity and the natural world are distant, estranged, so that we might fail to recognize the toad's virtues. Solie's toad is inaccessible to those of us who "can only hear my voice, my beauty, through the air." As if in response to the teenagers that misunderstood and tormented the sturgeon, the toad encourages us to not judge his life by "warm-blooded standards"; since it prioritizes human strengths over and against those of other natural creatures, such anthropomorphism is a form of domination. Though people may disparage the toad's "smallness," he assures the reader that his "Invisibility" is instead his "loveliness" (75).

While the creatures in both "Sturgeon" and "Toad" are not completely removed from human activity, they hold laws and lives of their own just as humanity does. In highlighting these unfamiliar worlds, Solie enacts Jakob von Uexküll's scientific vision: she blows "a soap bubble around each creature to represent its own world, filled with the perceptions which it alone knows" (319). Uexküll believes that acknowledging these unique perceptions allows people to "no longer regard animals as mere machines, but as subjects whose essential activity consists of perceiving and acting" (320).

Common criticism of ecopoetry that performs this function is that it inevitably participates in anthropomorphism—the ascription of human qualities to non-human creatures. Hence, poets "can only project human attributes, not recognize them, in other animals" (Shoptaw 403). To this critique, John Shoptaw responds that while the consciousness of an animal "is

something we'll never really know… What we do know is it is," for instance, "like *something* to be a bat. And if a bat has experiences, it can think and feel" (403). To counter anthropocentrism, "To empathize beyond human-kind," then, ecopoets need to "be ready to commit the pathetic fallacy and to be charged with anthropomorphism" (404). Yet, while Solie gives voice to her toad and ascribes a godlike, ancient status to her sturgeon, her approach is not entirely anthropomorphic. The assumptions she makes about animals stem from their real lives and histories: toads do survive by blending into their surroundings, and ancestral fish that resemble current varieties of lake sturgeons "have thrived… for millions of years" ("Toads"; Regier et al. 31). Her ecopoems imagine nature from this non-human perspective to counter the assumption that the organic world only holds value in relation to humans.

To Uexküll, the opposite approach to the natural world is prevalent in his field and bears dangerous consequences: "Many a zoologist and physiologist, clinging to the doctrine that all living beings are mere machines, denies their existence and thus boards up the gates to other worlds so that no single ray of light shines forth from all the radiance that is shed over them" (319). This process only reinforces the divorce between humanity and nature. On the other hand, what Solie wants to cultivate is affinity. After all, as she asserts in her interview with *The Rumpus*, it is "the belief that human endeavor is separate from the natural world" that in part causes the crisis (qtd. in Fraser).

Other ecopoems in *Short Haul Engine* record how landscapes influence their people. "Signs Taken for Wonders" opens in a church where a young woman and her sister giggle "at the new priest's Romanian accent." But the scene alters; amid the "thick August heat itchy as cow hair / with incense, flies," the speaker's sister "swoons." She is "Too delicate for these dog-days, / small, clover-blonde," and so she protects herself by sewing "indoors." This is a dry, bleak

place, where decorative, “silly doomed petunias” will never survive “in the clay.” Because the speaker’s sister is frail like those delicate flowers, she wilts in the heat. Even the speaker’s mother falters as her “pale eyelids” flutter like “cabbage moths” (*SHE* 15).

A prairie version of Mother Earth, “Dry Mother” elaborates on this stifling environment. The occupants of the prairies know that death inhabits the world around them: “We who live here / in the lap of this dry mother / know from our beginnings that it will come in dust.” This desert is powerful. There is little fertility here. Instead, residents hear “those drifts / that trouble the fenceline in daylight” and leave “perennials dead / even on the lee side.” All of these images of death, of “newly-hatched sparrows / choked by earth,” presage the Anthropocene. But they also foreground the power of the prairies—the “dry mother” who dominates its people. Despite all this death, life perseveres thanks to a “calm apology” from this harsh parent. When the wind finally stops, “seed planted in door frames” sprout” (*SHE* 14). Survival in these landscapes requires hardiness.

In contrast with her sister and mother, the speaker in “Signs” is one with her surroundings: “a big girl, sunburnt / skin like raw meat,” she may “be / the last one standing, / strong as a horse” in the pews of the Church (*SHE* 15). She parallels the narrator of “Eating Dirt” who looks back on a childhood photograph of herself consuming the earth, “feeding / methodically, in fistfuls” (13). This early craving for the earth creates in the young girl a likeness to nature: indulging her earthen appetite, she resembles “An early grinning vegetable,” a “Greedy rhizome” that sends “shoots / to gorge on portions of the yard.” In “Signs” such proximity to nature proves valuable. The speaker is tough like the landscape she lives in—and this allows her to withstand the dry wind and heat when others cannot.

The harsh landscape becomes an inextricable part of the identities of many of Solie's prairie residents. Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley suggest that while frequently critiqued today as naïve, sweeping statements about nature and Canadian identity like those from Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden* and Margaret Atwood in *Survival* are relevant to contemporary ecocritical approaches to Canadian literature and poetry (xvi). Put briefly, in the latter work, Atwood suggests that survival is the Canadian equivalent of the American frontier myth (31-2). In contrast with the frontier's "excitement or sense of danger," survival creates a prevalent sense of "intolerable anxiety" and a necessity to continue "hanging on, staying alive" (33). According to Atwood, the Canadian environment invokes a hostile relationship between humankind and nature that requires a preoccupation with place in Canadian literature. As Atwood argues, this preoccupation "with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival" (33).

According to Soper and Bradley, an "enduring stereotype" that *Survival* helped establish "holds that Canadian literature revolves around descriptions of nature: in novel after novel, and poem after poem, rugged mountains, whirling snowstorms, and desolate prairies torment hapless characters" (xvi). While there may be some accuracy to this stereotype, such efforts from Canadian writers are also an attempt to "understand the nature of nature – the constitution and character of wilderness and countryside – as well as to represent its effects, harmful or otherwise, on people" (Soper and Bradley xvi). Many of Solie's ecopoems take this approach; she focuses on the tension between humanity and nature and the struggle for survival in the prairies. These depictions of the power of the landscape remind us that we cannot control nature—rather, in many cases it controls us.

"Ill Wind" and "Staying Awake" are examples of this dynamic. Solie opens the former poem with two epigraphs by explorers who wrote about the prairie region of Saskatchewan that she grew up in. In the first epigraph, explorer and fur trader Sir Alexander MacKenzie denounces the area as an "inhospitable region inhabited by a people who are accustomed to the life it requires" (*SHE* 77). MacKenzie emphasizes a central case that Solie pursues: the argument that while prairie residents strive to modify the countryside for agricultural purposes, ultimately, it is they who must adapt to their surroundings to survive. The second epigraph further stresses the barrenness of this landscape. In it, Thomas Blakiston, an officer under British North American explorer Captain John Palliser, writes that "the southern part of the Saskatchewan country… has not inaptly been termed 'desert'" (Spry 159-69; *SHE* 77). Captain Palliser led the British North American Exploring Expedition (otherwise known as the Palliser Expedition) that sought to understand and map this region between 1857 and 1860. Due to the relative success and novelty of the Expedition, the area became known as Palliser's Triangle. According to Irene M. Spry, Palliser shared Blakiston's sentiments about the sterility of the plains:

> Palliser had no doubt that settlement in his "fertile belt" was possible and that "occupation of the country" would "only be a work of time." The "arid plains" of the "Triangle" were "a very different description of country." Later observers, notably Macoun, have quarrelled with this verdict and much excellent wheat has in fact been grown within the Triangle with the introduction of quickly maturing strains of wheat and improvement of dry farming methods and farm machinery. Even so, Palliser's Triangle has over the subsequent century fully justified his judgement when periodic dry spells have taken their toll in harvest failure, shortage of fodder and abandoned farms. (Spry 167)

Since she grew up on a farm in the Triangle, Solie likely experienced these dry spells firsthand. Her ecopoems, "Ill Wind" and "Staying Awake," take up these very issues that Palliser believed afflicted the region.

"Ill Wind" displays the hardships that residents of "Palliser's desert" endure. Local farmers watch as "topsoil call it a day / and lift off toward Manitoba." The harvest cannot take root in this unstable ground. Despite the farmers' desire to "gather it all in their arms," the "nursery poplars lose their babyish grip" and tumble away. Crops fail. Palliser predicted this. Yet residents blame the soil's "contagion" and the "poverty" that "spreads like tuberculosis," on immigrants to Canada—"*El Niño*'s unwholesome / immigrant weather." At a local joint, one launches a xenophobic rant to complain about civil rights movements, pride parades, "Indians / blocking the roads," and "Another wetback crashing the border." He resents what he believes to be open borders to the South that allow immigrants to encroach on his land, as if their "Fucking rights" disturb his own (*SHE* 77). And his fellow farmers agree; they respond with "A collective nod" and proceed to "repeat themselves past three, postured / as if waiting for one of their number to be chosen" (77-8).

However, harvest failure is an inevitable part of the landscape. In "Staying Awake," survival is also difficult. Death pervades the prairies. The poem centres farmers who, every fall, kill themselves "each in his own way" once they have paid their insurance: the first "hung himself in the barn"; the second "drowned in the dugout in back of his house"; and the third fired "a shotgun in the mouth" (*SHE* 72). Soil and blood become interchangeable as "Young guys" ask whether a truck is splattered with *"blood"* or *"Just dirt."* Wives are so accustomed to the almost ritual suicides of their husbands that they "don't talk among themselves" but "each woman, unheard, hides ammunition / in jewelry boxes and underwear drawers" (73). After all, "Fall is the

time for it" (72). As if meant to be there all along, their husbands' bodies join the earth and fit perfectly:

> In time this death too becomes a cliché,
> like the way his body fit
> into hollows of the land,
> how his vision curved with the fenceline. (*SHE* 72)

"Ill Wind"'s racist farmers are mistaken. Immigrants to Canada do not poison the earth or harm the crops. Rather, the landscape anticipates and invites death. It determines whether farmers turn a profit from their pastures and prosper or suffer.

But there is still beauty in Solie's homeland. In "Ill Wind," she seeks it out and finds it outside the bar, "Beyond the elevators, their creaking annexes, / past the slough, the dump" (*SHE* 78). Free from the turmoil of the intoxicated men lies a hidden oasis:

> between leaves of a nostalgic planet
> among memories of a sea, its delicate ferns
> and pearly shells, revolve surely
> with a world's slow weight
> in peace and calm and quiet. (*SHE* 78)

In the midst of this harsh landscape where plants fail to take root and grow lie fertile spaces rife with "delicate ferns / and pearly shells." Not all is desolate here. For Solie, Palliser's Triangle is a vertex where peace and chaos intersect; as she writes, "Everything happens here, then nothing / for a long long time." At once "inhospitable" and "nostalgic," the land both troubles its residents and offers quiet spaces for contemplation (77, 78).

Christopher Hitt argues that, in the era of the climate crisis, such beautiful yet punitive descriptions of the natural world are a necessary reinterpretation of the Romantic sublime: "In an age in which humankind, in its moments of hubris, imagines that it can ensure its own survival through technological means… the sublime is more relevant than ever before" (618). Hitt draws on Edmund Burke's and Emmanuel Kant's theories of the sublime to make the case for an updated version. According to Hitt, both Burke and Kant imagine the sublime as "a disorienting or overwhelming confrontation with a natural object": Burke believes that the sublime "comes upon us in the gloomy forest, in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or rhinoceros" and Kant "goes one step further" and stipulates "the necessity of nature (or representations thereof) to the sublime experience, granting that art can evoke a feeling of the sublime only insofar as it recapitulates nature" (Hitt 605). For Kant, part of this confrontation with the sublime is the realization that humans are mortal creatures and "beings of nature" (qtd. in Hitt 607).

But in Kant's vision, the sublime ultimately reinscribes humanity's supremacy over nature: the sublime experience begins with a kind of "cognitive dissonance" where the self faces a natural object that is beyond human comprehension, but ultimately, this rift "is overcome by the triumphant emergence of reason" that reveals humankind's primacy (Hitt 608). Hitt notes that, as a result of this final realization that Kant describes, many contemporary scholars have critiqued the relevance of the Romantic sublime to contemporary writing. In his essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon criticizes the contemporary disposition to idealize wilderness—"an inclination that, as he rightly notes, is largely indebted to the aesthetic of the sublime popularized by European Romanticism" (603). For Cronon, "The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work to

make a living" (qtd. in Hitt 603). The fundamental issue with this sublime wild nature is that it reinforces the natural world's otherness, its separation from the human realm. Other feminist critics including Barbara Claire Freeman, Anne Mellor, and Patricia Yaeger have criticized the Romantic sublime for "its endorsement of masculine power" (603).

However, Hitt argues that if contemporary writers disregard the final insight into humanity's supposed supremacy, Kant's sublime offers "a unique opportunity for the realization of a new, more responsible perspective on our relationship with the natural environment" (Hitt 605). While the primary contradiction of the Romantic sublime is that it includes "*both* humbling fear *and* ennobling validation for the perceiving subject," "humility before nature has consistently been" a central part of the sublime (606). For Hitt, a new ecological sublime would emphasize this humility to confirm the notion that, as Kant argues, humans are indeed natural beings. In contemporary art, an ecological sublime would therefore "resist the traditional reinscription of humankind's supremacy over nature" and stress the notion that the nonhuman world's power exceeds humanity's (606). Whereas Hitt believes that "we most certainly should… strive to recognize our kinship with nature," at the same time, the ecological sublime must recognize that there are "mountains that tower over us, oceans that separate us, hurricanes that could kill us" (612).

Through their descriptions of the natural world as unforgiving yet scenic, Solie's prairie ecopoems in *Short Haul Engine* enact Hitt's vision of a modern sublime. Her writing does not commit the wilderness fallacy that Cronon urges against; rather, locals, farmers, gas well outfitters, wives, priests, and children populate her poems and work the land. But the natural world humbles every member of her small prairie towns: her children faint in the heat, her

farmers look on as their plants perish. Solie dispels the notion that humankind reigns over the land. Like any other living creature, humans rely on the earth to survive.

If there is to be a war between man and nature, then, the latter wins. Still, in *Modern and Normal*, Solie resists such artificial categories; in her ecopoems from this collection, she continues to critique the false divide between humans and the natural world, but also deconstructs gender binaries that mirror this divide. Many of her poems in this collection argue that the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are linked and occur in tandem. She suggests that the association of humans and men with strength, and nature and traditional feminine traits with weakness, are false beliefs.

"Found: Publications in Natural History" problematizes the mechanical, impersonal approach to classifying the natural world that Uexküll sees as prevalent among scientists and believes reinforces the human/nature divide (319). In it, Solie lists the titles of articles and books from a 1971 bibliography that catalogue wildlife. Among these is "Alien Animals in British Columbia," an out-of-print text by G. Clifford Carl and C. J. Guiguet that documents the introduction of alien species into British Columbia (*MN* 63). Many such species arrived in the province to meet human needs and provide entertainment or were accidentally spread by settler ships ("Alien Animal Species"). For example, settlers brought the European Gray Partridge to North America because of its popularity as a gamebird in Europe ("Alien Animal Species"; Kaufman). As was the case with this partridge, people objectified these animals and turned them into a source of amusement. And in turn, some of these species became invasive and now harm biodiversity.

However, as destructive as this practice is, Carl and Guiguet's book does not condemn it; their work simply provides a historical record of these imported creatures. Chronicles of wildlife

like their book and the others that Solie lists take an artificial, impersonal approach to nature. They turn the natural world into an index of artifacts that can be put to human use, as in the "Guide to Common Edible Plants" or the "Guide to Marine Life." Such books also turn a profit: at the end of the poem, Solie lists a found request to "Please / send cheque or money order, payable: / The Minister of Finance of British Columbia" (*MN* 63). The process of naming, of labelling and sorting, becomes a colonizing process as governing bodies take ownership over and gain revenue from nature.

What happens when humans own land? "Gopher" suggests that the result is violence. The poem stages another battle between humankind and nature. In well-groomed lawns, "Dirt divers… pop up" like "fast and fleshy weeds" and create holes that "turn our ankles where" they have "been." Reminiscent of the arcade game, Whac-A-Mole, people in turn "bust" the gophers' "heads for fun" and revenge. Humans take pleasure in this brutality, which intensifies as they refine and perfect their combat strategies: "In the lab of summertime we experiment the finer points / of poison, snares, gasoline, twist your tails off at the root, / then finally, old enough, use that Christmas .22." In the eyes of hunters who greedily "can't spare a thing," gophers are "thieves" because they, too, live on the land. This power struggle between man and nature becomes a bloodthirsty cycle: now that the men have found the "First and precious / taste of blood, there's always more" (*MN* 71).

But Solie marks a distinction between regional hunters or farmers who rely on this land for survival and "city hunters who pay cash to anyone who'll take them / through the fields" to hunt fawns. In "spring when hungry coyotes raid the coops" and "kill the fawns," local hunters "need to shoot them too" because city hunters pay to pursue those fawns (*MN* 67). Whereas urban hunters kill for pleasure, rural ones do so out of necessity: they rely on the former to hire

them as guides. Due to their proximity to and knowledge of the landscape and food chain, residents of the countryside understand the dynamics of the natural world and can operate as guides for those to whom nature is foreign. Familiarity with the landscape proves an asset.

In "Cardio Room, Young Women's Christian Association" and "Determinism," Solie takes an ecofeminist lens to extend her critique of the false, hierarchical divide between humanity and nature and simultaneously undermine the social stratification of men and women. Put simply, ecofeminism articulates the belief that the principles that permit gender-based inequalities are akin to those that allow the exploitation of the environment (Sturgeon 237). As a feminist movement, ecofeminism "reworks a long-standing feminist critique of the naturalization of an inferior social and political status for women so as to include the effects on the environment of feminizing nature" (238). For instance, traditionally, womanhood and nature have often been conceived as instrumental. Both "have been valued either entirely or mainly in terms of their usefulness to others (e.g. to males in the case of women and to humans in the case of nature) who are taken as valuable in and for themselves" (Plumwood 120). Much ecofeminist literature therefore describes dualistic constructs that humanity must strive to reject: as Charlene Spretnak argues, "femininity/nature/body/emotion/connectedness/receptivity/the-private-sphere are devalued in Western societies and considered to exist in service to their 'superior' counterparts in the dualistic world view, masculinity/culture/mind(spirit)/reason/autonomy /aggressiveness/the-public-sphere" (Spretnak 425). This is an approach that Solie takes.

Initially, both "Cardio Room" and "Determinism" seem to adhere to the notion that the former categories associated with femininity are inferior and fall victim to the latter, masculine ones. "Cardio Room" begins with a confession to a former lover: "You won't know me." The speaker has undergone a transformation. She is no longer "A pink annual / given to low-born

intemperate acts." She associates her former self with weakness, with "fluff," and therefore with the natural world; whereas she used to be "agricultural," she is now "tough" and mechanical, like "a sport utility / vehicle" (*MN* 17).

The speaker has internalized the dichotomy that Spretnak believes Western societies espouse; she now avoids those traits that are traditionally feminine—emotions, a connection to nature, even the colour pink—and embraces what she believes denotes strength—an "iron," "nuclear" exterior, free from cute pet names like "Dumpling" or "Honeybun" (*MN* 17). As Annie Ross writes:

> … pink, because of its association with femininity, has become a color to avoid at all costs if one wants to cater to all genders and project a mature, serious image. The common avoidance of pink is simply a symptom of the much larger issue of sexism… it may imply that being feminine is undesirable. (Ross)

By embracing this philosophy, the speaker reinforces the view that femininity/nature is feeble in the face of masculinity/aggressiveness/human-made machines.

Similarly, "Determinism" presents a scene that at first glance seems to support this hierarchy. The poem opens in the middle of a hunt: "Someone's walking toward you, tree to tree, parting leaves / with the barrel of a rifle." Initially, "you," the reader, are an animal, the target of a man stalking you in the woods. But the scene shifts to the domestic sphere. Now, "you" are in the kitchen, "washing dishes, scouring / what's burned with a handful of salt" as the man continues "watching" you "awhile / through his good eye." The poem becomes a stream of consciousness; "you" tell yourself to "Keep your back to him. It's sexier / under the bulb, light degraded, / like powder" (*MN* 53). Since such descriptions of the private sphere and of the pressure to appeal to the male gaze are often associated with womanhood, they seem to suggest

that the central figure in this scene, the man's target, is a woman. Already, women and nature appear to correspond.

As the hunter continues his approach, his prey gains a heightened sense of smell and becomes increasingly animalesque: "There's a breeze and you smell him." She may, like the "pair of grouse" the hunter has caught, become another of his victims. After all, "in turning / you will see the dinner in all its potential," "The place / where you can face your history and see it coming," and meet a possibly violent end (*MN* 53). There seems to be a sharp separation between the characteristics of the sexes, and between the characteristics of humans and non-human animals, where women and animals are once again victims of men, and of humanity.

But is the central figure of "Determinism" really devoid of agency? Throughout the poem, she makes her own decisions: she chooses to wear "something nice," to appear "sexier," to "keep" her "back to him" (*MN* 53). She may even want to be the object of his desire. Ultimately, she knows how to hold the hunter's attention and manipulate him. And is she really a woman? Solie never reveals the sex or gender of this figure. Instead, Solie plays into the assumptions that readers might make about the character's gender based on traditional, instrumental roles for women. Readers could suppose that, because the figure caters to the male gaze, is pursued by a man, and works in the kitchen, it is female.

In addition, due to these traits and the figure's association with the natural world, readers may in turn assume the figure lacks power in the face of the male voyeur. As its title suggests, the poem undermines the "polarised way… human/nature, male/female dichotomies have been defined" and questions why these divisions determine the way Western society (like the speaker in "Cardio Room") views traditional feminine traits and nature as fragile (Plumwood 125). Does proximity to nature denote weakness? The agency of the central figure in "Determinism"

suggests otherwise. In light of this argument, “Cardio Room”’s speaker’s words seem more the naïve and angry ramblings of a rejected lover than an endorsement of the disadvantages of such closeness. It is the speaker’s resemblance to her natural environment in “Signs Taken for Wonders” that showcases her strength amid the heat of a wasteland.

For Solie, the human/nature divide is hollow, insincere. Instead, humans are “natural creatures” who, like “all creatures,” inevitably “alter their environments” (qtd. in Fraser). According to Solie, “‘Nature’ is that which ‘feeds our souls.’” Her poems like “Sturgeon” and “Toad” therefore ask readers to think beyond the human, to recognize the varied lives of different creatures, and to acknowledge that those creatures are subjects of the earth just as humans are. By capturing the harsh climate and splendour of Solie’s childhood home, her prairie poems stress that humans rely on and adapt to nature to survive. Yet she recognizes that few share the experiences of the countryside that she had in her youth:

> It was only after moving away to work, and then to go to university—where I met young people who talked about their “gap year,” who’d read Camus and Whitman in high school, and who said things like “You haven’t been to Paris? You must go!”—that I realized what I’d thought of as the center of the world was not. I met people for whom growing up in the country was a bucolic fantasy, when in fact I’d long been aware of the industrialized monoculture of even the small family farm, the crime profiles of out-of-the-way places. (qtd. in Fraser)

Solie’s memories of her “small family farm” are not universal. Not everyone in Canada toils outside in the fields to make a living. But people do adapt to their surroundings. To survive the cold of winter, people wear warm clothes and huddle indoors. Likewise, in the heat of the summer, we move to the shade. As Solie states, “Once in awhile we are forced into awareness of

our place in the system, the fact that we are not the end point in the food chain. As climate and environmental events have demonstrated, we don't have the last word" (qtd. in Fraser).

While extreme weather events increase, they will continue to force humanity to recognize that the wilderness is not "a playground"—it can overpower and consume us. As the most destructive period of its kind ever recorded, Canada's 2023 wildfire season exemplifies the inescapable quality of that power ("Canada's record-breaking wildfires"). Unlike previous years, the 2023 summer fires "were widespread, from the West Coast to the Atlantic provinces, and the North. By mid-July, there were 29 mega-fires, each exceeding 100,000 hectares." Smoke from these wildfires spread through cities in Quebec and into the United States, forcing urban residents to wear masks and hide indoors. According to research scientist Yan Boulanger, these widespread, unprecedented fires are due to the climate crisis: "Climate change is greatly increasing the flammability of the fuel available for wildfires because the trees, fallen trees, and underbrush are all so dry…This means that a single spark, regardless of its source, can rapidly turn into a blazing inferno" ("Canada's record-breaking wildfires"). Cities are not free from the effects of the crisis. The dust ridden, almost apocalyptic landscapes of Solie's poetry emphasize the climate's potential to stifle and destroy.

Although these early poems from Solie's first two poetry collections undermine the belief that humans are separate from nature, they make little reference to climate change itself and to humanity's role in exasperating the crisis. Human activity harms the titular animals in "Gopher" and "Sturgeon": gophers suffer as locals attempt to banish them from backyards, and the sturgeon resides among pesticides and other pollutants that contaminate his waters. However, in both poems, Solie's focus is primarily ecocentric—she uses these depictions of human cruelty to showcase the strength of these creatures in the face of adversity. Yet despite this resilience, the

sturgeon has become increasingly defenceless against human actions. In 2003—only two years after the publication of *Short Haul Engine* and two years before that of *Modern and Normal*—the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada agreed that the white sturgeon species should be considered endangered ("White Sturgeon"). Today, the World Wildlife Fund lists the sturgeon as "the most endangered species group on earth" due to "overfishing, a flourishing illegal caviar trade," and "habitat loss." Such changes make it increasingly difficult for ecopoets to focus solely on the force of the nonhuman realm and avoid humanity's impact on nature. In her later works, then, Solie's attention shifts to account for this issue.

"We have a Leviathan on our hands": Human Enterprise and the Climate Crisis in *Pigeon*, *The Living Option: Selected Poems*, and *The Road in Is Not The Same Road Out*

In *Recomposing Ecopoetics*, Lynn Keller coins a new ecopoetic category—poetry of "the self-conscious Anthropocene"—that differs from the ecocentric focus of traditional nature poetry and instead emphasizes humanity's impact on the natural world. According to Keller, the self-conscious Anthropocene began when, in the year 2000, Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer proposed that humanity has altered the planet so significantly that we have "entered a new geological epoch they named after humans": the Anthropocene (2). In January 2002, Crutzen released a short essay titled "Geology of Mankind" that further promoted the term. He announced:

> Because of… anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, global climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour for many millennia to come. It seems appropriate to assign the term "Anthropocene" to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene—the warm [interglacial] period of the past 10-12 millennia. (qtd. in Keller 3)

As Keller writes, Crutzen's essay continued to list many of the destructive changes that humankind has wrought on the earth, including the rise in methane-producing cattle, the fast-paced disappearance of tropical rainforests, and the substantial increase in concentrations of greenhouse gases from fossil-fuel burning and agriculture (3-4).

Keller recognizes that the Anthropocene is a contentious term. Historically, scientists have struggled to agree on the Anthropocene's inception. Some scientists have argued that the Anthropocene began with the Industrial revolution's accelerated use of fossil fuels, and others

that it started with the advent of agriculture, "registered in the fossil pollen record and changed soils" (Keller 5). Still others point to the moment "about five thousand years ago when the methane level, registered in the ice core, began to rise," or to the arrival of Europeans in the New World and the expansion of global trade networks at the end of the fifteenth century, which "introduced the globalization of human food crops as well as the cross-continental movement of other animal and plant species" (6). But Keller's "self-conscious Anthropocene" is separate from any distinct label for the geological era wherein the Anthropocene may have begun. Rather, her new category denotes "the period since the term Anthropocene was introduced when, whether or not people use that word, there is extensive 'recognition that human actions are driving far-reaching changes to the life-supporting infrastructure of Earth'" (1). Poetry of the self-conscious Anthropocene therefore issues from this growing awareness and responds to "contemporary environmental changes and challenges" (2).

The goal of Crutzen's essay was to call on both scientists and engineers to guide society toward "'environmentally sustainable management'" in an era wherein humans "play such a large but often insufficiently intentional role in shaping their own future and environment" (4). Yet Keller argues that alongside these scientists and engineers, poets too can raise awareness of humanity's impact on the natural world. *Recomposing Ecopoetics* analyzes works written since the year 2000 by thirteen North American poets who seek language to effectively highlight complex environmental issues. These poets include Evelyn Reilly, Ed Robertson, Juliana Spahr, and others. According to Keller, poems of the self-conscious Anthropocene address "conceptual challenges of the Anthropocene, such as the difficulty of grasping the scale of humankind's planetary impact in relation to deep time," or confront "material problems, such as the damage

toxic anthropogenic chemicals and materials such as plastic do to human and environmental health" (3).

In *Pigeon*, *The Living Option: Selected Poems*, and *The Road in Is Not The Same Road Out*, Karen Solie takes this approach that Keller describes. Her ecopoems in both collections constitute poems of the self-conscious Anthropocene because they depart from her early focus on the lives of plants and animals to attend to the impact of human endeavour on nature. In *Pigeon*, humans are parasites that feed on and violate the earth's natural resources to the detriment of the creatures whose habitats they destroy. The works in *The Living Option* and *The Road in* are more political and philosophical than *Pigeon*: they target ideological forces that produce or enhance the crisis, such as the scepticism of climate deniers, and suggest that while the crisis is all-pervasive, it also exacerbates wealth-based inequalities.[1] Through these diverse depictions of humanity's impact on nature, Solie expands the connection between ecologies and politics and critiques the hubris that encourages our abuses of the natural world.

In *Pigeon*'s "Wild Horses," Solie laments the loss of the titular equines that twentieth-century extractive processes have deprived of land. She devotes most of the poem to the majestic physique and vigour of her horses:

> The Iberian head, roman-nosed. Black,
> bay, chestnut, dun, some buckskins, palaminos,
> roans, a few paints, stouthearted, with primitive
> dorsal stripe, *equus callabus* returned
> to the New World in the sixteenth century

[1] *The Living Option: Selected Poems* contains poems from her previous poetry collections as well as new works unique to this collection. However, many of these new poems were republished in *The Road In Is Not The Same Road Out*. Given the significant overlap between these two publications, I have elected to analyze both works in tandem.

> as Spanish Andaluz mustangs, blessed with speed,
> a good fear, their ears' ten muscles. Only a dog's
> nose is keener. Escapees of expansion
> from Mexico, their descendants, travelled north along
> the Rockies, millions coast to the Great Plains
> restored to the authority of the herd, its shelter,
> its law, knowing from birth which rivers
> they can cross, where sweet water lies,
> and the saltgrass. In wolf scent, winter hunger,
> deerflies, rear blindspot. Points of balance triangulate
> from the skull, behind the shoulders. Jaws
> can snap a coyote's spine, hooves halve rattlers. (*P* 7)

These striking "roman-nosed" horses are robust, natural hunters: they are "blessed with speed" with jaws that "can snap a coyote's spine." They are survivors with heightened senses who know "from birth which rivers / they can cross, where sweet water lies." Like Solie's sturgeon and toad from *Short Haul Engine*, the horses bear unique laws and require specific conditions for survival: they find comfort and force in numbers since "the authority of the herd" is the horse's "shelter, / its law." Given their sheer strength, the horses seem impervious to threats. Yet humans have already compromised these herds: the horses have become "Escapees of expansion / from Mexico" that have fled to "the Rockies" and "the Great Plains" to attempt to regroup (*P* 7).

Towards the poem's end, Solie's attention shifts from the power of the horses to their deaths at the hands of humans. Destructive developments in the countryside ultimately deplete the feral horse population. Despite their vigour, the mustangs fall "Before twentieth-century

machinery… / ahead of ranchers and oilmen." They are shuttled out of their lands, "cleared / from coalfields staked at Bighorn, the survey's / immovable starting point." Only "A few hundred remain" in inhospitable, "grizzly lands below / hanging glaciers." But these residual horses, too, are at risk as their lives become sites for human entertainment: "they're shot for sport, caught for rodeo stock" (*P* 7).

Ecopoet Juliana Spahr believes that such representations of the contact between human ventures and the natural world are fundamental to ecopoetry. In *Well Then There Now*, Spahr writes that when she moved to Hawaii, she discovered that while there is an abundance of nature poetry about Hawaii, "Much of it is written by those who vacation here and it is often full of errors" (69). During this period, she began "To loudly and hubristically proclaim whenever" she "could that nature poetry was immoral" (69). Her primary suspicions about nature poetry arose because "even when it got the birds and the plants and the animals right it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat" (69). It was not until Jonathan Skinner began to publish the journal *Ecopoetics* that Spahr found a poetic tradition that recognized the threat of humanity. With Skinner's publication, Spahr came to realize that "what I was looking for all along was in the tradition of ecopoetics—a poetics full of systemic analysis that questions the divisions between nature and culture—instead of a nature poetry" (71).

Spahr's condemnation of nature poetry as immoral has been subject to some criticism. John Shoptaw, for instance, has pushed back against the claim that all nature poetry is immoral and an entirely separate entity to ecopoetry:

> While we should remember that Gary Snyder had already in 1959 written from bitter experience about the bulldozer in the ancient forest, I appreciate Spahr's problem with

> nature poetry. If a contemporary nature poem leaves its reader in still contemplation of Mother Nature's creatures, it risks being complacent, even what Spahr judges "immoral." But when Spahr adds that nature poems "often show up in the New Yorker or various other establishment journals," she is talking not environmental but poetry politics. An ecopoem may be innovative or it may be what I call "renovative" (where any poetic feature, past or present, is available for renewal), or it may even be resolutely traditionalist — and it may appear anywhere. We need all kinds of poems to find and stir up all sorts of poetry readers. (Shoptaw 400)

As is the case with many of Solie's early poems in *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal*, nature poetry, or ecopoems that display a natural world inhabited by humans but that are not explicitly critical of human activity, can prove transformative. Her early ecopoems displayed the inherent strength and value of nature. But in "Wild Horses," Solie showcases the perils of humanity's abuse of the nonhuman. Spahr's metaphorical "bulldozer off to the side" that destroys habitats appears in the form of oil rigs and coal fields that not only assault the earth but also reduce wildlife populations like the unfortunate horses (Spahr 69). Solie begins to focus on the fusion of nature and culture.

In "Tractor," the bulldozer is no longer on the sidelines. Solie's poetic efforts turn to a single human-made machine that forms only a small part of humanity's large-scale destruction of the Earth. The three-stanza poem begins as its speaker lauds the size, strength, and efficiency of the "Buhler Versatile 2360" tractor:

> More than a storey high and twice that long,
> it looks igneous, the Buhler Versatile 2360,
> possessed of the ecology of some hellacious

minor island on which options

are now standard. (*P* 27)

The tractor is a godlike, grandiose machine that is both "igneous" and "sublime." Its sheer size—"a storey high and twice that long"—looks as if it contains a "minor island." Even its destructive force appears impressive since "it manifests fate, forged / like a pearl around the grit of centuries" (27, 28; Löschnigg 35).

While Solie's speaker praises the power of the tractor, it ultimately harms the natural world. When it and other machines collaborate to extract methane gas from the ocean, they render "the air concussive, cardiac, irregular" and therefore silence "the arguments of every living thing." And on its own, the tractor pollutes the air with "the diesel smell of a foregone conclusion" (27, 28). Löschnigg argues that these descriptions of the majestic yet vicious tractor reflects "on the one hand, mankind's still unbroken belief in technology" and on the other hand "sets about to deflate this image and unmasks it as a deception" (35). Solie does the latter through "matter-of-fact information as to the tractor's cost, its technical details, references to the parent corporation in Houston and above all the concluding implication of the tractor's possible breakdown: 'And when it breaks down, or thinks / itself in gear and won't, for our own good, start, / it takes a guy from the city at 60 bucks an hour / plus travel, to fix it'" (35-6). Though a novelty, "well recognized… / among the classics: Wagner, / Steiger, International Harvester, John Deere, Case" and a number of other heavy equipment manufacturers, the Buhler Versatile 2360 is not infallible (*P* 28).

Yet Solie not only undermines mankind's celebration of its machinery through the possibility of the tractor's collapse; she also depicts such celebration as misplaced because of the tractor's role in the rise of climate change. In "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and

Modes of Narrativity," Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman argue that individual human and nonhuman things, like "water, soil, stones, metals, minerals, bacteria, toxins, food, electricity, cells, atoms, all cultural objects and places," or in Solie's case, a tractor, do not appear in ecoliterature as single elements but instead "form complexes both natural and cultural" (83). Due to the "proliferation of studies bearing on the intellectual movement known as the 'new materialisms,'" both authors introduce a new model of ecocriticism—"material ecocriticism"—which suggests that "the supposed determinate boundaries of things, objects, human agents, concepts, and texts become more fluid and permeable" (75, 85).

Drawing on Bill Brown's "Thing Theory," Iovino and Opperman suggest that "culture's trash and garbage," and its material items, are "semantically irreducible to objects" (83). Rather, "They 'speak' in a world of multiple interacting processes, such as climate change or the systems of production and consumption of global capitalism, entailing geopolitical and economic practices and thus reminding us of the fact that 'the linguistic, social, political and biological are inseparable'" (83-4). Material ecocriticism therefore tracks the "artistic and cultural expression of these" networks, opening the "textual possibilities of the materiality created in art, culture, and literature" and relocating "the human species in broader natural-cultural environments of inorganic material forces" (84). Solie's tractor is thus not an isolated actor. Rather, it is a single link in a chain of artificial processes that illustrate humankind's mistreatment of the environment. It is only one of many "classics" in the world of heavy machinery. But it is also one machine of many that violates the earth to help "tap the sweet gas where it lies like the side / our bread is buttered on" (*P* 27). "Across the road" from the tractor, "The ancient sea bed will be fractured to 1000 feet" so "pipe" can reach for that gas. The Buhler Versatile 2360 is part of a greater extraction project. By helping to dig for methane gas—a greenhouse gas whose presence in the

atmosphere effects the earth's temperature and climate system—the tractor contributes to the climate crisis ("Importance"). Like the oil rigs that eradicate wild horses from their habitats, the tractor pillages the earth of life.

"Four Factories" is another of Solie's poems that explores the damage humans execute on the environment. This poem is divided into four sections, each of which describe a different factory in Alberta: the first refers to a collection of oil refineries "At the nominal limits of Edmonton"; the second, a *Frito-Lay* potato chip factory "at the east end / of Taber"; the third, a cement factory "West of Dead Man's Flats, at Exshaw" and near "Kananaskis and its lime plant"; and the fourth, *Alberta Beef* in Calgary (*P* 19-22; Löschnigg 34). According to Löschnigg, each of these factories has been involved in minor or major scandals related to humanitarian or ecological concerns (34).

Solie alludes to this harmful legacy in the poem. Her Edmontonian oil refineries, for instance, are "wreathed / in their emissions." At the same time, "Employees are legion" but "transient," undervalued (*P* 19). Similarly, the working conditions at *Alberta Beef* are an "awe-inspiring tedium" where "Team members should expect / heavy physical labour and fast-paced / repetitive tasks" (22). As a result of this dull work environment, "Labour / unrest" becomes a fixture of this factory. And akin to the oil refineries in Edmonton, *Alberta Beef* harms the environment: its dictate states that "Animals are not our friends."

But Löschnigg argues that these factories are "*symbols* of capitalism and exploitation, making it clear that they could be substituted by almost any other corporation" (34). All of these factories produce similar effects: they rely on and take advantage of underpaid employees or generate serious ecological damage. In accordance with Iovino and Opperman's description of material ecocriticism, then, these factories are not discrete actors but are instead part of a broader

system of cultural acts that contribute to the contamination of nature. Solie also "unmasks society's blindness" to the widespread commodification of the environment when she uses "the jargon of the tourist brochure": she describes the potato chip factory as "Worth leaving the highway for. Gorgeous / at sunset, really outstanding" (Löschnigg 35, *P* 19). Her descriptions of the factories as almost interchangeable signal that they are but a fraction of a global system of companies that exploit their employees and the natural world for economic gain. In Solie's ecopoetic opus in *Pigeon*, tractors, factories, oil rigs, all combine to form an intricate network of resource extraction that harms the environment. Nature and culture are neither separate nor symbiotic. On the contrary, the former falls prey to the latter.

Solie explores this parasitical relationship again in both "Parasitology" and "The World of Plants." She begins the former poem with "elegies" to animals who are dying off because humans have disturbed their habitats. The first of these is "The endangered Banff snail" who is "on its last legs / after vandals swam in its pool" (*P* 85). Solie's description of the cause behind the snail's disappearance is based in scientific fact; as of 2000, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada labelled the Banff springs snail "endangered" and later discovered that vandalism and the illegal use of thermal springs by humans are "major threats to the continued existence of the species" ("The Endangered").

For Solie, elegies to animals like the Banff springs snail are "incessant," endless, because humanity's impact on the natural world is so extensive (*P* 85). The snail is but one example of current at risk or endangered animals. Solie describes another animal, the "magpie," who "flaps off / like an action figure" and disappears so that "We'll not see his kind / around here again" (*P* 85). Solie's preoccupations here are funereal. Animals are dying off. Human disturbances produce a chain reaction where habitats change and biodiversity decreases.

Indigenous peoples advise settlers that while the "collision of valleys" that make up the habitats of the magpie and springs snail are "a good place to meet… you shouldn't sleep here." But "whites" ignore the advice of these locals. Instead, they erect "a town, a big hotel" within those very valleys. However, in building these developments, the settlers face the wrath of this landscape: "Later" they discover "a Geomagnetic / Resonance Factor that screws up people's ions" (*P* 85). The Indigenous peoples were right. It is not safe to sleep here. By disregarding Indigenous knowledge of the landscape, the settlers not only disturb nature, but jeopardize human health.

Such disregard for Indigenous peoples' advice is reminiscent of recent politics surrounding the expansion of the Trans Mountain Pipeline in Canada, which Solie describes in her 2019 essay on climate change, "Sing it Again":

> This June, the Canadian federal government reapproved (long story) an expansion of the Trans Mountain Pipeline to run parallel to the existing line from Edmonton, Alberta, to Burrard Inlet, near Vancouver. Though protests by environmental and Indigenous groups are ongoing (a number of Indigenous leaders have also expressed support for the pipeline), Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promises 'shovels in the ground this summer', the creation of 'good middle-class jobs', reduced dependence on US markets, and eventual Indigenous participation in the pipeline's ownership. He assures us that all profits from Trans Mountain will be invested in clean energy futures to support the phasing-out of traditional sources. Like many, I will believe this when I see it. ("Sing It")

Despite protests from many environmental and Indigenous groups, the expansion is currently under way and nearly complete. While Solie could not have foreseen the extension of the Pipeline when she published *Pigeon* ten years previously, "Parasitology" demonstrates a pattern

in the behaviour of political actors who prioritize profit over the interests of Indigenous or environmental groups. As Solie writes:

> Asked to write on the broad topic of climate crisis, I run up against the implicit reality that it can't be separated out from systems of economic inequality, racist violence, political corruption, short-sighted misanthropic greed, and all the local evils they perpetrate. ("Sing It")

For economic advancement, the strangers to the landscape in "Parasitology" ignore the warnings of Indigenous peoples. Even when these settlers discovered the "Geomagnetic Resonance Factor," their "short-sighted misanthropic greed" still prevails because "by that time the gift / shops were thriving" and producing wealth (*P* 85). Driven by this greed, settlers turn the natural world into capital; in the local gift shop, tourists purchase "bones and teeth / of animals who lived 350 million years ago."

"The World of Plants" further elaborates on this capitalist mentality. In it, the speaker lauds plants because, in their deaths, they become a useful resource: "they're reborn to us selflessly / in fossil fuels!" (*P* 30). From this perspective, plants bear no inherent value. They are only beneficial when humans can make use of them since "People, we're at the centre of" this "great mystery" of fossil fuel production. As he shifts his attention to praise human intervention in the spread of invasive species, the speaker's anthropocentric outlook becomes increasingly absurd:

> Anyone who spots the alien invader Asian
> Longhorned beetle in the neighbourhoods
> is asked to report this immediately
> to the city. Without our efforts, no tree is safe. (*P* 31)

People rally together to prevent the spread of this "alien invader." Such effort becomes a civic duty that clears the speaker's conscience and seems to act as counterweight to humankind's use of dead plants for fossil fuels. It allows him to assume that people have a net positive effect on the environment, since "Without our efforts, no tree is safe."

But the speaker fails to mention how the beetle arrived in Canada. The Invasive Species Centre states that while the beetle was originally native to several Asian countries, including China and Korea, it "was introduced into Canada when infested wood from plantations was used as packaging material for cargo being shipped to North America." Ironically, it was humans, then, who introduced this "alien invader" to Canada, enabled its spread, and jeopardized the lives of countless trees. Through the speaker's praise for poisonous fossil fuels and ignorance of this history, Solie derides the way we disregard our overuse of nature. Like "Parasitology," "The World of Plants" depicts how human endeavour turns plant and animal life into materials for consumption. Composed of varying depictions of this abuse, Solie's ecopoems from *Pigeon* close the gap between nature and human life: a divide that Solie believes "allows us to prioritize… 'progress'" and in turn prompts the climate crisis (qtd. in Fraser). Society has an indelible impact on the natural world.

Such depictions persist in *The Living Option* and *The Road in Is Not The Same Road Out*. Yet now, Solie's works critique prevalent human beliefs that produce environmental damage and examine how the climate crisis, in her view, "can't be separated out from systems of economic inequality" ("Sing It"). "Via" is one such ecopoem. As she makes her way through Ontario on public transit—the Via Rail train—Solie's speaker in "Via" observes that the landscapes that surround her have become laden with waste. She passes small towns like "Oakville. / … Ingersoll. Aldershot, Woodstock, Glencoe, Chatham," that now witness "the fate of plastics / and

obsolete electronics purchased / at big-box developments pinning the new grids down." None of these towns are densely populated: of those Solie lists, Oakville has the highest population with over 211,000 residents and the others far less. Yet they all have sizeable dumping grounds; in Oakville, for example, "hills of scrap aluminum glitter / like a picnic ground in heaven." These soiled environments seem to reflect the conditions of its residents, who struggle to secure worthwhile careers; while "Some good jobs have returned" to these towns, they are "diminished, untrustworthy in their refusal to commit, / and refusing benefits" (*RI* 28). Poverty and pollution occur in tandem.

As her journey progresses through Ontario, Solie's speaker observes the sheer spread of this pollution. Alongside "Playing fields, the Park & Ride, nursing homes / like nurse ships" lie "Off-world / junkspace with mysterious distributive protocols, / peevish piles of refuse under a 'No Dumping' sign" (30). The speaker wants to escape, to leave behind "These towns," / like" her "own," which are "forever inadequate / to the secret self who forges ahead." Like her fellow travelers—"young mothers, elderly couples, gamers talking shop / business travellers stuck in the minors, students / clothed in battlefields"—she is "a type, too"; she is restless, "Bereft, content, bored witless, anticipatory," hoping to escape these wastelands (29). Via Rail offers her that escape. Separated by train windows, she becomes a distant observer of the residents in these towns who must endure the litter and lack of employment prospects.

Litter permeates the landscapes outside the train in "Via." In contrast, affluent residents in "The World" never witness such pollution. Solie infuses the latter poem with references to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a philosophical work composed of a set of intricately numbered aphorisms largely about formal logic. In this slim volume of work, Wittgenstein set out to solve all of philosophy's problems "by showing how such problems arise

because we misunderstand the true logic of our language" (Legg). By breaking from this misunderstanding, he believes we will recognize that "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein). *The Tractatus* therefore sets out to map a particular logical structure that Wittgenstein believes underlies both reality and language; "He assumed that the two must mirror each other or language could not function" (Legg). Within this logical structure lies "a multitude of specific facts, each of which can be stated clearly. The structure itself cannot be talked about, but it can be shown" (Legg).

Wittgenstein begins his treatise by proposing that "The world is everything that is the case" (1). For Wittgenstein, then, language mirrors reality. He explains this viewpoint:

> Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits. So we cannot say in logic, 'The world has this in it, and this, but not that.' For that would appear to presuppose that we were excluding certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case, since it would require that logic should go beyond the limits of the world; for only in that way could it view those limits from the other side as well.
>
> We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either. (Wittgenstein 86)

In other words, Wittgenstein proposes that the way individuals react to and interact with the world and each other depends on the language that they use to communicate (Legg). Hence, the limits of language are also, to him, "the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 57). Language and its meaning can therefore never be wholly objective because language cannot be independent from its context.

As the poem's title suggests, then, Solie draws on Wittgenstein's belief that language reveals the limits of an individual's world in "The World." The cruise ship that Solie describes

and ironically titles "The World" refers to "a cruise liner of 165 luxury apartments owned by a community of residents who live on-board as it continuously sails the globe" (*RI* 83). Such wealthy inhabitants indulge in constant luxury on this ship: amid its "soothing neutral tones and classic-contemporary / decor of our professionally designed apartments" lie "private verandahs before which the globe, endlessly and effortlessly circumnavigated, slips by" (13). Aboard The World, they visit "no end of exotic ports" and experience "a new destination every few days" (13).

Despite the residents' wealth, their perspectives are limited. As the speaker in "The World" articulates, there is little intimacy between the citizens of The World and the destinations they visit: "In Reykjavík or Cape Town, it's the same. Familiarity / without intimacy is the cost of privacy… Even at capacity, the World is eerily empty" (14). The speaker cannot understand nor articulate the places he visits. Abundance trumps familiarity and knowledge. As a result, his world—in Wittgenstein's sense of the word—is trifling, hollow, without substance. His consciousness contains only his own fortunate experiences; he and his fellow passengers do not know the ship's "crew of highly trained specialists in housekeeping, / maintenance, beauty, and cuisine — the heart and soul of the endeavor —" who go "largely unseen" (15). In accordance with Wittgenstein's argument about language's limits, the language of these residents only reflects the world they know; in this case, the "limited / whole" of The World's pristine amusements, the world of the elite (13).

Solie draws on Wittgenstein's arguments to highlight the privileged seclusion of humanity's highest earning. Members of high society need not concern themselves with the ship's crew who inhabit the caste system's lower rungs. Instead, they can whip a "chequebook out" to flit between destinations and visit "Polar bears, musk oxen, rare thick-billed / murre"

without any regard for the local landscape nor the conditions of these creatures, some of which are “rare,” endangered (13, 14). While “The World” is not necessarily an ecopoem as theorists like John Shoptaw define the term since the poem contains little reference to the environment or environmental issues, it is still relevant to Solie’s ecopoetic oeuvre (395). Unlike “Via,” there is no mention of pollution in “The World” despite the carbon-intensive nature of cruise ships (“Oceana”). But it is the very absence of such pollution and the travellers’ very failure to empathize with the animals and locations they visit that render “The World” ecocritical. Solie intentionally ignores the climate crisis in “The World” to critique the closeminded psyche of the ship’s wealthy, who can afford to exist only within their own private yet opulent bubble and overlook the ethical and environmental implications of their tourism.

Taken together, “Via” and “The World” illustrate how, as Rachel Godsil argues, the climate crisis not only produces ecological damage and reduces biodiversity, but also exacerbates wealth-based inequalities (Godsil 394). In the former poem, litter is widespread among poorer communities. In the latter, litter’s absence signifies wealth. As Iovino and Opperman argue in their theory of material ecocriticism, trash is therefore more than the sum of its parts; the uneven distribution of garbage across both poems illustrates how unmitigated climate change and pollution disproportionately affect the poorest regions of people (Guivarch et al.). Even though “A single cruise ship produces smokestack and exhaust emissions equivalent to 12,000 automobiles every day,” and the “average cruise ship produces seven tons of garbage and solid waste” daily, the wealthy on board the ship are aloof from the consequences of their mode of transport (“Oceana”). The World’s residents mirror much of humanity’s elite, who spend and consume with little regard for others and the effects of their actions.

For Solie, such ignorance lies at the root of the ongoing crisis. “When Asked Why He’d Been Talking to Himself, Pyrrho Replied He Was Practising to Be a Nice Fellow” briefly critiques those who remain unconvinced of the crisis’ existence despite mounting scientific evidence to the contrary. Once again, she turns to one of philosophy’s most notable to advance her argument: this time, the Greek philosopher Pyrrho (“Pyrrho”). Solie acknowledges in her notes on the poem that its title “is adapted, along with a line in the poem, from Diogenes Laertius’ *Life of Pyrrho*” (*RI* 83). The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* records the dubious nature of such accounts of Pyrrho’s life and philosophical outlook. With the exception of some poems “allegedly written while on” Alexander the Great’s expedition to India (whether or not Pyrrho actually took the journey is uncertain), “Pyrrho wrote nothing” (“Pyrrho”). As a result, historians and philosophers rely on descriptions of Pyrrho from his contemporaries. Laertius’ work is a “major source of” such “biographical anecdotes” (“Pyrrho”).

Through numerous tales, Laertius depicts Pyrrho as unconcerned with societal conventions: “he wanders off for days on end by himself, and he performs tasks that would normally be left to social inferiors, such as housework and even washing a pig” (“Pyrrho”). Laertius states that Pyrrho “walked about without paying any attention” to chariots, precipices, or dogs (Blackwell 330). In response to Pyrrho’s behaviour, numerous scholars have debated whether he lived by his doctrine. One of Pyrrho’s followers, Timon of Philius, provided the most reliable account of Pyrrho’s philosophy—though even it is fraught with controversy (“Pyrrho”). Peripatetic Aristocles of Messene wrote a summary of an account by Timon “of what appear to be Pyrrho’s most general philosophical attitudes” (“Pyrrho”). In Timon’s summary of Pyrrho’s thought, he states that Pyrrho asked and answered three questions:

> … in order to be happy, one must pay attention to three connected questions: first, what are things like by nature? second, how should we be disposed towards things (given our answer to the first question)? and third, what will be the outcome for those who adopt the disposition recommended in the answer to the second question? ("Pyrrho")

Because Pyrrho supposedly answered each question with Greek epithets, his responses are subject to interpretation. But broadly speaking, Pyrrho answers the first question by stating that one cannot possibly know the true nature of things. For any statement, he believes the opposite can be equally advanced. Given the subjectivity of knowledge, Pyrrho suggests in his response to the second question that it is necessary to suspend judgement. Finally, in answer to the third question, Pyrrho believes that since nothing can be known, "the result for those who adopt the unopinionated attitude just recommended is first *aphasia*" ("lack of passion") and then *ataraxia"* ("freedom from worry") ("Pyrrho"). Pyrrho's wandering behaviour and lack of concern for his own well-being therefore suggest that he lived to embody those two epithets.

In Solie's poem, her speaker lives like Pyrrho and by his principles. The poem follows the speaker as he makes his way to work:

> Carrying my ladder to the next jobsite, I may get you one way
> turning to identify your voice, and the other
> as I resume my path. It isn't personal
> merely aluminum and telescopic. (*LO* 136; *RI* 9)

Like Pyrrho, who inadvertently ran into chariots, the speaker meanders to work with little regard for his surroundings: he may or may not "get you one way / turning to identify your voice, and the other / as" he "resumes his path." Yet the speaker admits that "It isn't personal" for he is indifferent, malleable like "aluminum."

The poem becomes a stream of consciousness as the speaker's thoughts continue to echo Pyrrho's beliefs. Climbing atop his ladder, he contemplates "oilsands, acts of / war, abandoned dogs sobbing in confusion and grief" (*LO* 136; *RI* 9). But while "a fear follows" such tragedies, the speaker proposes that their "correlative… is all the world's joy." Just as Pyrrho believes that any statement is necessarily on par with its opposite, Solie's speaker equates joy with global hardship. The speaker exists detached from the world's atrocities. He internalizes Pyrrho's advice to remain impartial, unprejudiced, since "those who pledge definitively / and confidently" receive "a curse" (*LO* 137; *RI* 10).

But such dispassion proves perverse. Near the end of the poem, Solie's speaker applies Pyrrho's scepticism to the climate crisis. In tones reminiscent of the ignorance of climate change deniers who regard the signs of the crisis as merely natural phenomena, the speaker argues that "The death of your cockatiel and the shearing / of an Antarctic glacier the size of Manhattan are events / differing only in kind" (*LO* 137; *RI* 10). Now Pyrrho appears illogical. A single cockatiel's death does not produce the devastating domino effect that melting glaciers do; the latter yields a rise in sea levels with many disastrous consequences including coastal erosion, storm surges, and the deaths of creatures whose habitats consist of those very glacial climates. Whereas the death of a pet cockatiel is inevitable and natural, the destruction of glaciers is often anthropogenic; since the industrial revolution, greenhouse gas emissions have caused "the net shrinkage and retreat of glaciers" (Bajracharya et al.). By representing this false equivalence, Solie stresses that humanity cannot afford to remain neutral in the face of this global crisis.

Recognizing the widespread dangers that the climate crisis poses not only for the natural world, but for humanity as well, Ursula K. Heise expounds the connections between ecocriticism, risk theory, and literature. Heise draws on Ulrich Beck's concept of a "risk society"

to define these connections. In his work, Beck proposes that modern societies have entered an era of "reflexive modernization" wherein "modernizing processes transform not traditional social structures, but those created by earlier waves of modernization" (Heise 146). Beck believes the threats that characterize this era "can be defined by two criteria: they are themselves the effects of modernizing processes, thereby reflexively confronting modern societies with the results of their own modernization; and some of these risks, such as global warming and the thinning of the ozone layer, are for the first time truly planetary in scope" (146).

In the 1980s, Beck speculated that these risks would lead to "a new stage in the evolution of modernity": instead of a postmodern, this new stage would be a "risk society." In this risk society, hazards transcend "existing stratifications" and generate "a new kind of social structure," which he sums up with the aphorism: "Poverty is hierarchical, smog is democratic" (qtd. in Heise 146). Whereas technologies were "formerly latent and invisible," the industrial development of modern societies are now at the point where "unintended 'side effects'" are "emerging into full public view" (147). Even the socially privileged and those who have profited from ecological exploitation will eventually feel the harms of these effects.

Building on Beck's risk theory, Heise analyzes the interpretation of risk scenarios in two American novels: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Richard Powers' *Gain*. In her analysis, she argues that both novels explore "the danger of chemical contamination as part of a larger investigation of the risks to which citizens of modern societies are exposed, and of the way risk scenarios form part of the texture of contemporary sociotechnological structures" (147). To Heise, risk as a literary theme is "a crucial trope by means of which writers… explore the porous boundaries between body and environment, public and domestic space, and harmful and beneficial technologies" (147).

Though Heise limits her analysis to novels, Solie's ecopoem, "Bitumen," extends the connection between risk theory and narrative to include poetry. In the poem, calamity strikes. Apocalyptic storms spread as "Cloud darker than cloud cast doubt upon muttering, pacing / water" (*RI* 61). Oceans recoil and depart "from society by choice" since "the aftermath of accident or crime" has defiled "their living room." What happened? How have we reached this point? Solie reveals the cause:

> In sixty-
>
> five-foot seas
>
> for the Ocean Ranger, green turned to black then white
>
> as molecules
>
> changed places in the Jeanne d'Arc Basin, the way wood passes into
>
> flame, and communication errors into catastrophic failure
>
> for the Piper Alpha offshore from Aberdeen. (*RI* 61)

Both the Ocean Ranger and the Piper Alpha were offshore oil platforms that reached tragic ends: the first, a drilling unit that sank in Canadian waters after a storm in 1982, and the second, an oil platform that exploded due to inadequate maintenance and safety procedures in 1988 (O'Neill-Yates; Macalister). And both had disastrous consequences for nature and humanity alike. After the storm demolished the Ranger, not only did oil spread as "molecules / changed places" and the "green" ocean shifted "to black then white," but 84 workers perished (O'Neill-Yates; *RI* 61). Similarly, the "flame," "communication errors," and "catastrophic failure" of the Piper Alpha released oil into the water and killed 167 workers (Macalister; *RI* 61). In "Bitumen," destruction spreads. There is no end in sight. We have lost control, entered Beck's risk society, and now our

machines "consume the perceivable world," including ourselves (*RI* 61). No one will escape unscathed.

For Solie, the consequences of our technologies are manifest, unavoidable. Ecopoems from *Pigeon* like "Wild Horses," "Tractor," and "Four Factories" depict the diverse and widespread destruction that the petroleum industry and other fossil fuel extraction processes wreak on the natural world. As she demonstrates with her Buhler Versatile 2360 in "Tractor," even a single machine can produce significant costs as it violates the earth. Solie seeks to bridge the gaps between nature and culture, the environment and the human-made. These gaps, she argues, allow us to rationalize climate change: "If we think of nature and the human as each going about its business, we can more easily… insist that it has nothing to do with us, that islands of plastic in the ocean don't exist" (qtd. in Fraser).

To counter this separation, her ecopoems therefore highlight the ongoing violence that human activity brings both upon the natural world and upon people; in accordance with Lynn Keller's definition for poetry of the self-conscious Anthropocene, Solie addresses the "material problems" that anthropogenic activities bring to the well-being of both humans and environment (3). In *The Living Option* and *The Road in Is Not The Same Road Out*, pollution and poverty coincide. The prevalence of litter amid the less affluent communities in "Via" and its absence among the rich in "The World" illustrate how the crisis disproportionately affects the less privileged. As Solie wrote in 2019:

> If the connotations (and aggressive marketing) of health and purity make water eminently exploitable, so do those of its delivery system – all those innocent recyclable bottles, most of which are not recycled. An investigation published this June records 68,000 shipping containers of American plastic sent for 'handling' last year to countries which

> offer ‘cheap labour and limited environmental regulation’, including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Laos, Senegal and Vietnam. The report quotes Vietnamese plastic sorter Nguyễn Thi Hồng Thăm: “We’re really scared of the plastic fumes, and we don’t dare to drink the water from underground here.” Those who do the work have no choice, she says; “We don’t have money.” *Canadian Geographic* documents shipping containers of plastic mixed with garbage, “including dirty diapers”, arriving in Manila from Canada. “When people think their stuff is being recycled, it clears their conscience, no matter what is actually happening beyond the blue box,” says Myra Hird, a specialist in waste management at Queen’s University’s School of Environmental Studies. “Our research shows that when their conscience is clear they tend to consume more than ever. Since Canadians started recycling in earnest maybe 30 years ago, consumerism in this country has done nothing but climb.” (“Sing It”)

Poor workers in Vietnam suffer the consequences of Western waste. To survive, they have to drink contaminated water and breathe toxic fumes. But Canadians remain blissfully unaware of the harm their consumerism causes; rather, they feel they can “consume more than ever” because recycling “clears their conscience.”

Solie’s “The World” and “When Asked Why He’d Been Talking to Himself, Pyrrho Replied He Was Practising to Be a Nice Fellow” satirize this obliviousness; in the former poem, she depicts cruise ship residents who remain content in their privileged bubble, and in the latter, she critiques those who ignore the evidence of the advent of climate change. Yet the notion that anyone can avoid the crisis proves an illusion. Rather, in Solie’s words, “We have a Leviathan on our hands” (“Sing It”). Our technologies are spinning out of our control. Accidents like those in “Bitumen” harm nature and take human lives. Collective survival requires that, as Solie argues,

we discard our “avoidance or hysterical denial,” reign in our greed, and protect Mother Nature (qtd. in Fraser). For if we fail to change our consumerist ways, we will all feel the wrath of climate change. In her next and most recent poetry collection, *The Caiplie Caves*, Solie will turn to analyze the impact of human activity on the natural world across broader geographical and temporal planes.

"We write to communicate… to make people's lives a little better": The Cycle of Ecological Damage in *The Caiplie Caves*

Unlike Karen Solie's previous collections, *The Caiplie Caves* revolves around the life of a single person: Ethernan, an Irish missionary from the seventh century who withdrew to a cave on the coast of Fife, Scotland, to consider whether to establish a priory or to become a hermit (*Caiplie Caves* xi). Despite the distribution of Ethernan's name across carved stones, in dedications, and in the village and church of Kilrenny, as Solie notes, "where he appears in the accounts he is often sketched only briefly, in passing." Through her poetry collection, Solie fills this gap. She imagines the issues that might have influenced Ethernan's resolution to retire to his cave and to choose between a public or private life. For Solie, Ethernan's concerns are those that recur today:

> …because I became so interested in Ethernan and the history of the place, I did a lot of research toward that end and discovered, of course, that many of the same factors or similar factors influencing his decision, or that I imagine influenced his decision, are still in play in some form: Christian colonialism, wars for territory and authority. (qtd. in Morton)

In Solie's poems, Ethernan at once recoils from colonialism and war, and from emerging activities that harm nature. He grapples with conflicting desires: he feels beholden to his public Christian duty as missionary, and yet wants to escape the rampant violence that people commit against each other and the environment. Surrounding the ecopoems written from Ethernan's perspective are those that transcend time, extend beyond the coast of Fife, and demonstrate how the destruction of the natural world that he witnesses persists today. Not all of the poems in *The*

Caiplie Caves are ecocritical in nature; many instead address the trials of war, work, economies, self-delusion, faith. Yet when Solie does address climate change in this collection, she considers environmental problems beyond the lifetime of one person, and across vast temporal and geographical scales.

The poems in *The Caiplie Caves* form two main types: the right-justified Ethernan Poems, wherein Solie speaks through the hermit, and the right-justified poems in the present, which "seem more or less autobiographical" (McClatchey). Suggesting a "mirroring of" anxieties and "personae," the poems occupy different sides of the page (McClatchey). And when Solie's ecopoetic works move to the present, they become self-referential. Solie herself relates to Ethernan's desire for privacy:

> I don't have any social media accounts, but the thing is that I'm old, so the tool of it is not the same kind of tool for me as it is for someone who grew up with the internet. God, I remember writing my university papers out longhand and then typing them out on a typewriter! That makes a difference as to how one sees this whole situation. That we can be this connected is fabulous. But, by nature I tend toward the solitary side. I certainly have some very good friends that I've had for many years, and they are very important to me. But, I'm not a very public person. (qtd. in Asmussen)

As a contemporary poet, Solie is simultaneously a public yet solitary figure. She contends both with the need to publish her works and broadcast her voice, and the desire for privacy. In the modern age, Solie's speakers too have become disillusioned with the world and desire an escape. Like Ethernan, they witness the destruction of the earth and recoil from it. Yet in this contemporary, globalized, intricately connected world where pollution abounds, the seclusion that Ethernan sought becomes difficult, almost impossible to achieve.

Among these dissatisfied figures is a poet who laments the limits of poetry and explores whether it is ever possible to capture the world through the inadequacies of language. Unlike her previous works, *The Caiplie Caves* becomes self-reflexive; Ethernan's uncertainty manifests in Solie's poetry. Depicting the struggles of this poet figure, Solie questions the role of the poet in the face of climate change and considers the significance of her own ecopoetic oeuvre. When political action is essential to prevent the crisis, can ecopoems contribute to climate activism? Or should the poet simply retire? Solie's poems answer these questions. Her works demonstrate poetry's ability to reveal truths, to uncover the behaviours that have brought the world to a breaking point.

According to Timothy Clark, climate change and ecopoems like Solie's are "inherently deconstructive… of current modes of thought in politics, economics, and cultural and literary theory" ("Towards" 46). Clark believes that in literature and beyond, ecological thinking tries "to understand how waste dumped into the sea or the atmosphere does not conveniently disappear but sets off an unpredictable sequence of consequences" for humanity and the natural world alike (46). In *The Caiplie Caves*, Solie enacts Clark's definition of ecological thinking. As in *Pigeon*, *The Living Option: Selected Poems*, and *The Road in Is Not The Same Road Out*, her poems in this collection depict human endeavours that harm nature. However, in contrast with these previous poetry collections, the ecopoetic canvas in *The Caiplie Caves* becomes more self-reflexive but also expands to consider the genesis and lasting costs of human ventures that harm biodiversity. The destruction of the natural world that Ethernan observes swells, intensifies, and exists today on a global scale. Moving between the seventh century and the present, Solie's poems depict the long-term consequences of human actions. By transcending temporal and geographical boundaries, they suggest that harmful human endeavours do not occur in a vacuum.

Rather, as Timothy Clark acknowledges, ecocide becomes a human habit that creates dangerous and volatile effects both in the moment and into the future.

"Evidence of his own cult in Pictland exists in the distribution of carved stones bearing his name" and "'Ethernan' likely derived from the Latin 'aeternus' or 'eternal'" depict the genesis of such violence and Ethernan's desire to escape it. Though Solie grants them separate titles, both works are companion poems: the text from the former flows into that of the latter. The first poem captures the Christian colonialism and wars that afflicted Scotland's people during Ethernan's lifetime, while the second illustrates how such brutality spread throughout the landscape and came to affect nature. Accordingly, "Evidence of his own cult" relies on the historical context of both seventh century Scotland and of Ethernan's own life. During that period, Scotland was a world divided; it was a melting pot of different groups and a site of Christian colonialism ("The Site" 130). Before the Middle Ages, most of Scotland's population practiced a form of Celtic polytheism (Cunliffe 184). When the Roman authority collapsed in the early fifth century, "a process of coalescence and conquest turned a fairly large number of smallish tribes into a small number of larger units": the Angles, Britons, Gaels, and Picts (Grant 48). These groups fought for control over the land. Meanwhile, throughout the sixth and seventh centuries, Irish-Scots missionaries sought to further sever Scotland's peoples' ties to Paganism and Christianize the whole of Scotland (Fletcher 231). Religious persecution and violence therefore permeated and even characterized seventh century Scotland.

It is in the midst of such political and religious turmoil that Ethernan—or Solie's version of Ethernan—chooses to withdraw into exile. As an outcast, he considers whether to give in to his natural inclinations to solitude or to continue to participate in the violence that surrounds him. Though historical accounts of Ethernan's career vary, a number of them suggest that he "was an

Irish missionary to Scotland who withdrew to the Caves in the mid-7th century in order to decide whether to commit to a hermit's solitude or establish a priory on May Island" (*CC* xi). Solie's depiction of Ethernan's life aligns with these accounts. As an Irish missionary, Ethernan would have been tasked with extending the reach of Christianity throughout Scotland (Fletcher 79-80).

But Solie's Ethernan comes to resent this task. In "Evidence of his own cult," Ethernan describes the arrogance that has afflicted his fellow missionaries and impelled the conversion of Pagan worshipers. When he and his fellow "Companions of God" experienced "visions as actual contests / confronting dragons as did the Child Jesus," they used those visions to justify "striding broad tracts of land" to spread God's word. Although Ethernan's fellow missionaries framed their work as a "duty to the people," he now recognizes their efforts to promote Christianity as hubristic. By equating their visions to Jesus' battles, the missionaries elevated themselves to a god-like status—a status that would support their efforts to ensure that Scotland's Pagan "past might be destroyed / and remade." As Ethernan observes, he "can't be sure now there ever was humility in" such work (*CC* 14). The missionaries became hypocrites who failed to practice the very Christian humility that they preached (Dunnington 1).

Alongside this missionary project, cruelty abounds as Scotland's minor kingdoms fight each other. Accordingly, before his retreat to the Caves, Ethernan witnessed "corpses piled up until the whole world was a tomb" (*CC* 15). To Ethernan, these ceaseless fatalities "reduced our ability to think metaphorically"—to pursue connection and empathy. Instead, the missionaries and warring groups became more confident in their own merits and entrenched in their ways: all "believed the things" they "said" simply "because" they said "them." Missionary efforts became a colonial project as preachers sought to divorce the people of Scotland from their Pagan pasts. Moreover, these efforts developed against the violent backdrop of constant war. Amid such

discord, such strife, Ethernan discovered that "the temper of my own voice drained away" (16). Ethernan's faith falters. He has found no room in society for Christian virtues of charity, kindness, or patience. From raging warriors to prideful missionaries, the people that surround Ethernan all seek to dominate and subdue each other.

"'Ethernan' likely derived from the Latin 'aeternus,' or 'eternal'" elaborates on Ethernan's insecurity. In the poem, Ethernan recounts how death spread through Scotland from its people to the natural world:

> until, finally, all was noise
> rage and shame of creatures domesticated by brutality
> uncanny beings mechanized under the influence
> of austerity's single truth
> and the amphetamine of perpetual conflict (*CC* 17)

The natural world could not evade Scotland's "perpetual conflict." Rather, nature became another locus of cruelty: "domesticated by" human "brutality," "creatures" cried out in "rage and shame" at their mistreatment. Humans violated animals, deprived them of freedom, and turned them into utilities. While Ethernan "was" always inherently "shy," in the face of such brutality, his reticence "immediately duplicated itself" and strengthened (17). Disheartened by Christian colonialism, war, and the destruction of nature, Ethernan gave in to his growing desire for solitude and escaped to the caves to evaluate whether to continue to participate in such a vicious world. Aggression and brutality have become humankind's defining traits.

In Ethernan's lifetime, people fail to exist in harmony both with each other and with nature. The first in a series of poems titled "Song" provides further examples of ecological harm. Now, Solie focuses on seventh century extractive processes that begin to disfigure and spoil the

natural scenery. When settlers arrive on the coast in “Ships” to “harvest souls,” they create “fields cut from the forest” so that “I no longer saw the forest dwellers” (34). Previously lush tracts of land become inhospitable. The animals—the forest dwellers—who have long inhabited these lands must evacuate, disappear.

To clear room for both agriculture and a “pit” from which workers “harvest gold,” people assault the fertile earth and destroy the local flora. And when the settlers are done, when they can take no more of value from the land, they turn “trees… into ships, and sail away” (*CC* 34). Though “Song” seems to end with the ships’ exodus, its action is recurrent. Since the ships that depart the shore resemble those that arrive at the poem’s inception, Solie implies that “Song,” and the deeds it depicts, are continuous. Settlers will find new territories wherein they can further attack the earth and complete this extractive cycle once more. Humans attempt to dominate the landscape. The war between man and nature has begun.

Other poems in Solie’s collection show the current results of this battle. Solie’s “Goodbye to Cockenzie Power Station, a Cathedral to Coal” marks one of many temporal jumps to the present that occur in *The Caiplie Caves*. The poem takes its title from an article in *The Guardian*, in which the author, Fraser MacDonald, laments the loss of a power station in East Lothian, Scotland:

> One of the most emblematic features of East Lothian’s landscape, Cockenzie power station will be blown up on Saturday, its twin towers and turbine hall erased by the shift to clean energy and an unsentimental planning system.

> The end is nigh for Cockenzie power station in East Lothian. At 12 noon on Saturday, the distinctive twin chimneys will buckle and fall; a second explosion will bring down the steel turbine hall.
>
> Nothing can save them now: all that's left to do is make our lament and find a good spot to watch the spectacle. It is not often that an entire landscape changes with the press of a button, but when the dust finally settles over Port Seton, the view east
> from Edinburgh will reveal an even horizon. (MacDonald)

Presumably, with the end of this coal power station comes clean, renewable energy. In the advent of the climate crisis, such shifts are essential. Coal power stations like that in East Lothian not only contribute to greenhouse gas pollution and emit toxic and carcinogenic substances into the air, water, and land; they also rely on coal mines that damage surrounding landscapes ("Coal Explained"). Despite the power station's destructive properties, MacDonald honours it. For him, its towers form an "emblematic" feature of the local landscape that supersedes the coastal scenery of East Lothian. By describing the station as a place worthy of worship—a "Cathedral to Coal"—MacDonald suggests that its destruction is sacrilegious, a desecration of the surrounding scenery.

Yet in her poem, Solie critiques such praise for this supposed cathedral. "Goodbye to Cockenzie" alternates between left-justified stanzas that describe the power station, and right-justified stanzas in italics that interject to show the scope of human industry. In the first of the former stanzas, Solie describes the potential origins of the station:

> It might've sprouted from the rhizome of the Leven
> Syncline, fed on post-war optimism

without joy, full of use, liberated
from embarrassing sensitivity. Every idea a lesser one
in proximity to its architecture of practice, purity
of self-definition. Cockenzie Station demonstrating
the irreducible — gas, ash, atmosphere
deformed by a temperament (*CC* 61)

Solie's description of the station as a sprout that emerged organically from Scotland's geology is ironic. She embraces MacDonald's belief that the station is a central characteristic of Scotland's landscape to unmask it as a deception. There is nothing natural about this power station. It is not an intrinsic part of the land. Instead, it is an artificial structure at odds with the environment; it spews "gas, ash," and other pollutants that warp the "atmosphere." While MacDonald states that the demolition of the power station is a result of "an unsentimental planning system," Solie suggests that it is instead the station itself that "sprouted" from humanity's unfeeling passion for progress: "Cockenzie Station" is "without joy… liberated / from" the "embarrassing sensitivity" that MacDonald mistakenly attributes to it. It is man-made, "full of use," a product of a "world dominated by means of production that demand continuous economic expansion" (*CC* 61; "Towards" 47).

Nor is the Cockenzie power station unique. Rather, it has a litany of "Sister stations at Kincardine, Methil, Longannet" (*CC* 61). Together, all of these stations pollute their surroundings: they use up the "town water" to help pulverize "rail-borne, road-borne coal." Moreover, they also rely on coalmines, great "open pits" that further disfigure Scotland's natural scenery. Like many of Solie's poems in *Pigeon*, *The Living Option*, and *The Road In Is Not The Same Road Out*, "Goodbye to Cockenzie" again reflects Iovino and Opperman's concept of

material ecocriticism to suggest that these stations are not isolated actors but are instead part of an intricate network of systems—in this case, coalmines, railroads, and trucks—that contributes to the pollution of the natural world (83).

In her italicized stanzas, Solie shows how the industrialization that the coal power stations embody have infected their surroundings. *"May Island / nostalgic in"* the Cockenzie plant's *"visual field"* has had its *"infrastructure repurposed, / adapted, added to."* Automation spreads through the landscape like a disease. The Island's *"legend, relics, conservation, charm,"* its *"old ways,"* do not fit in with the capitalist desire for economic expansion. Similarly, humans have *"retrofitted / for automation"* other man-made historical sites like *"Stevenson's lighthouse / a gothic castle"* on the coast (*CC* 62). While MacDonald writes that the destruction of the power station marks a shift towards clean energy, Solie suggests instead that other harmful activities will replace the station; though "the land" is "newly earmarked for habitat, an ecovillage" it will also contradictorily serve as a "cruise ship terminal / on what some are calling the Scottish Riviera" (63). Solie's poem depicts how human greed once again prevails over the need to preserve and protect the landscape. One source of contamination replaces another. "Song"'s early damaging activities have intensified, spun out of control, and become a hallmark of civilization.

However, in "The Meridian," Solie questions poetry's descriptive power, its ability to adequately capture the traces of the climate crisis. The poem departs from Scotland's coasts for Canadian oceans. On a Canadian shore, a poet figure struggles against the limits of language. It is as if Solie inserts her own literary concerns into the poem:

> Fishers, who mapped Kilrenny steeple
> as a marker to direct them at sea, call it St. Irnie
> to this day. I can't bring you back.

My imagination's not enough … (*CC* 30)

Who is this speaker and whom do they want to "bring… back"? Is the speaker a product of Solie's mind, a lonely figure who wants to recover a former lover? Or, more likely, is this Solie herself, questioning her ability to revive Ethernan through her poetry? Does she fear that her "imagination's not enough" to "bring" Ethernan "back," to depict his life through art?

The problem that Solie elaborates on in the poem is whether it is ever possible to adequately depict anything through the imperfect medium of language. But the speaker's attention shifts mid-way through the poem. Now, her mind gazes outward as she turns to describe her surroundings. On the horizon, "The harbour's full of sightsee daycruisers, / private recreational vessels" that contaminate the ocean alongside "trawlers left / to cross swords for" the "odd jobs" of former Canadian petroleum company, Talisman Energy (*CC* 30). Yet because she undermines her descriptive powers at the outset of the poem, the poet calls into question this subsequent depiction of industrial pollution and, more broadly, ecopoetry's ability to adequately capture and critique the crisis.

Like Ethernan, the poet is uncertain of the value of her work. Her "imagination" is either insufficient or "lost… offshore among the rigs" (*CC* 30). Oil rigs, private ships, and trawlers both taint the ocean and tarnish the poet's creative capacity, her ability to envision Ethernan's life, which was a time when industry was less widespread. Just as Ethernan sought to escape the violence that surrounded him, this modern poet feels disheartened by the destruction of the earth. But unlike Ethernan, she cannot break free from the filth. It surrounds the Canadian shoreline and spreads across the ocean floor.

Escape into the wilderness, into lawless natural spaces, is unfeasible. "Sauchope Links Caravan Park" elaborates on this impossibility. When another of Solie's speakers seeks a retreat

near the Scottish town of "Kirkcaldy," she finds herself surrounded by financial obligations that tether her to civilization:

> Here is the rent reminding
>
> tenants they don't own, interest confirming
>
> for the borrower to whom the principal belongs.
>
> Here is the insurance to tell us we're not tenants
>
> safe, and here is the loophole which allows it
>
> to not pay. (*CC* 6-7)

During "the week" she and her partner "can afford" to leave home, she should be able to watch "Gulls up at dawn" and engage in "quiet enjoyment of the sea views" (*CC* 6). But "rent," "interest," and "insurance" remind her of the brevity of her vacation. The "vacation home" is not Ethernan's cave; she cannot stay here in silent contemplation because it is "not ours" (6). Bills pile up. Finances prove an obstacle to freedom. The world is so tightly integrated and pollution so extensive that Solie's speakers cannot find respite in nature.

In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, Ursula Heise describes the impact of the spread of pollution. Since the climate crisis occurs on a global scale, Heise writes that cultural and ecological systems no longer exist solely on a regional or national level. To illustrate this point, Heise coins the term "eco-cosmopolitanism," which she defines as "an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and nonhuman kinds" (61). Her theory suggests that ecosystems have become borderless because

they all face similar threats. To counter the climate crisis, then, Heise argues that people need to consider the global nature of environmental risk.

Building on her theory, Heise analyzes the presence of the eco-cosmopolitan framework in literature. For Heise, Ursula K. Le Guin's short story, "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow," illustrates how the world's ecosystems are intimately connected (17). The story is about a team of scientific explorers who arrive on a planet called World 4470 to discover that the whole planet's undergrowth constitutes "one large network of processes... There are no individual plants, then, properly speaking. Even the pollen is part of the linkage, no doubt, a sort of windborne sentience, connecting overseas. But it is not conceivable. That all the biosphere of a planet should be one network of communications, sensitive, irrational, immortal, isolated'" (qtd. in Heise 18). In accordance with Heise's vision of eco-cosmopolitanism, Le Guin's story envisions an ecosystem "that cannot be understood as encompassing anything less than an entire planet" (Heise 17). As is the case on earth, in World 4470, toxic human endeavours harm the immediate region in which they occur and impact the entire globe.

Solie's ecopoems in *The Caiplie Caves* fall in line with Heise's framework. For instance, in "Goodbye to Cockenzie," local industrial plants bear global consequences. The coal that burns in the power stations pollutes local waterways and contributes to the deterioration of the Earth's atmosphere. Industry stretches across the world to afflict both the Scottish lands in "Goodbye to Cockenzie" and the Canadian oceans in "The Meridian."

Infused with the unavoidable and largescale conditions of global warming, ecopoems in *The Caiplie Caves* rebuke the concerns of the poet in "The Meridian." Solie's works demonstrate ecopoetry's ability to illustrate and confront the climate crisis. As John Shoptaw writes, "ecopoetry… has designs on us… imagines changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and

act in the world" (408). By staging some of her ecopoems in the present, Solie simultaneously demonstrates how the degradation of the natural world that Ethernan witnessed continues today, and how it has become extreme, universal, inescapable. Her ecopoems encourage us to witness, reckon with, and challenge this long history of ecocide that has led us to the current crisis. They reveal that "some things must go… dams, oil rigs, plastic bags," coal power stations, cruise ship terminals, pollution (Shoptaw 408).

"He enquires of the silence" and "An Enthusiast" evince that the natural world and humanity's abuse and neglect of it are worthy subjects of poetic thought. In the former poem, Ethernan observes nature as it grows and matures around him: he watches the "rock" as it "ages, is swarmed by a peppery crottle" and "grasses grow around" its "crevices" that, in turn, "small creatures move into" (*CC* 54). His new hermetic state, his retreat to the titular Caiplie Caves, grants him a connection to nature; he feels these changes "happening all around me." Yet Ethernan's new life exists at odds with his previous public role as missionary. His appreciation of nature conflicts with his Christian education:

> the teachings say no earthly thing is worthy of affection or contemplation
> barnacles, mussels, the *Patella vulgata*
> look dried out and foolish at low tide
> but I see nothing fallen here
>
> when evening in its uniform jangles its key ring
> lyrics float through our common hour
> *if it's of no use to us, is it useless?*
> *if it's useless, does it still not deserve to live?* (*CC* 54)

Though as a missionary, Ethernan ought to turn his attention to God since "the teachings say no earthly thing is worthy of affection or contemplation," he sees beauty and vitality in the surrounding environment. Nature refutes the Genesis myth's fall of the earth: while "barnacles, mussels… / look dried out and foolish at low tide" Ethernan sees "nothing fallen here."

Thrust into solitude, his faith continues to falter. He begins to interrogate the anthropocentric hierarchy that sets the affairs of humanity above the lives found in nature. In his final queries that end the poem, Ethernan questions the capitalist valuation of the natural world. The journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*'s House Organ suggests in "Nature Is Beyond Value Because We Are Part of Nature" that capitalist societies worldwide view nature as useful when it can be marketed and sold for profit and as worthless when useless for capital accumulation (144). But Ethernan interrogates this global assessment of nature's worth: if the aging rock, its grasses, and its tiny residents are "*of no use to us*," Ethernan asks, are they really "*useless*" and "*if*" so, do they "*still not deserve to live*" (*CC* 54)? Witnessing the strength and elegance of the local landscape, Ethernan wonders whether it is nature and not man nor even God that is truly worthy of contemplation, worship, and protection.

As if in response to Ethernan's concerns, Solie immediately follows "He enquires of the silence" with "The Enthusiast," in which she lauds the natural world and further critiques the capitalist appraisal of nature that *Capitalism Nature Socialism* describes. The poem begins with a recognition of the Fife coast's ancient history: near "Lady's Tower" the poet observes the "Endless heritage beneath the heavenly soundshed" with "Ten varieties of scones / in Elie… Giant centipedes and petrified tree stumps / of the Devonian fossil record" (*CC* 55). Such prehistoric markers are symbols of nature's resilience. They have survived the destruction

wrought during Ethernan's lifetime, and now persist despite contemporary human damage to the environment.

Yet "self-taught experts" and "Amateur geologists" amass along the coast and crawl among the relics to evaluate their worth. As the poet observes, such specialists determine that the "Pyrope garnets at the foot / of Lady's Tower aren't quite rare enough to accrue significant / market value" (*CC* 55). Although the fossils predate humanity, they fall victim to the market, to capitalist "Ideas" that "gather around" them "as though for warmth." Because fossils like the "Pyrope garnets" are not profitable, they become—as Ethernan observes in the previous poem—"*of no use to us*" (*CC* 54-5).

While people value and devalue the natural world "according to imperatives of capital accumulation," nature in "The Enthusiast" also resists economics (House Organ 144). At the poem's end, the poet returns her attention to the power of the earth. She looks "to sandstone / comprehending itself by breaking at joints produced by the forces" of the ocean. Ranging "four metres higher" than the shore, the waves are formidable. They refuse to relinquish the sandstone, the ancient fossils, to the hands of the human interlopers that seek profits; instead, "the stacks," of rocks become "preferentially and justly eroded along their planes of weakness by seas" (*CC* 56). In answer to Ethernan's questions about nature's value, "The Enthusiast" suggests that the natural world holds its own inherent worth, its own rules, outside of the capitalist market.

But Solie's poem is also introspective. It addresses the metafictional issues that she interrogates in "The Meridian." Whereas the poet in "The Meridian" ponders whether ecopoetry is accurate, effective, meaningful, here Solie demonstrates poetry's ability to deconstruct inherited beliefs that diminish the natural world to a commodity for human consumption. Nature becomes a productive site for Solie's ecopoetics. And in turn, her ecopoetry deepens the sense of

nature's presence in human lives and confronts the anthropocentrism that excuses abuses of the natural world.

Propped up by human greed, ecocide has become a constant, vicious, and rapidly expanding cycle that has global implications. It is a product of our constant desire for economic progress and a habit that we must break to survive. The destruction of the natural world, the mines that people carve out of the previously untouched earth in "'Ethernan' likely derived from the Latin 'aeternus,' or 'eternal'" and "Song" persist; as Solie demonstrates with the coal power stations in "Goodbye to Cockenzie Power Station, a Cathedral to Coal" and the oil rigs in "The Meridian," anthropogenic activities today continue to harm the earth, but on a global scale.

Faced with such unpleasant acts, Ethernan retreats from the world to consider whether to become an active figure in his community or remain a hermit. Solie elaborates on her interest in Ethernan's choice to withdraw from the world:

> I suppose my interest in how one decides to engage with the world — how one decides to be, in the terms of that time, an "active" or a "contemplative," and whether one necessarily even needs to make that choice — was a result in part of the era we're living in. The urgency of political action, of community, of resistance. But that's always been the case… (qtd. in Morton).

While Ethernan could retreat from Scotland's violence in the seventh century, today, ecological damage has become so widespread that people cannot escape. In the face of the climate crisis, "political action,… community" and "resistance" are all essential. Yet as Solie argues, "that's always been the case"—there has been cruelty and human-induced environmental destruction throughout human history. Ethernan saw both. Although Solie is careful "to not propose a morality in the work," to not decide whether Ethernan's privacy is an ethical way to live, she is

interested in "the working through it, the trying to move through it, to get some place, some transition," some positive conclusion to the chaos of climate change (qtd. in Asmussen).

The speaker in "The Meridian" questions whether ecopoetry can ever help people achieve that "transition." Can ecopoetry spark resistance? Or does language simply dilute what it depicts? In 2021, a few years after the publication of *The Caiplie Caves*, Solie seemingly responds to these concerns:

> You've probably participated in or have been an audience member for poetry panels that are structured around the question "What is poetry for?" And, again, I think attention is at the core of that… We write to communicate. We pay attention to the people around us and what they need, as well as to ourselves and what we need. We want to make people's lives a little better the way reading others as made our lives better. Writing, and reading, are ways of coping… So there are several levels on which attention is important: from the personal and the small and the temporary to the political and the inter-relational and what we need to pay attention to as human beings in a society — as people who are aware of how our lives affect other lives, human and nonhuman. If there is anything at the heart of what I'm trying to do as a writer and as a person, I suppose it comes down to that. (qtd. in Morton)

As a poet, Solie strives to show people "what they need" and what they should "pay attention to." By depicting how the actions of Ethernan's generation have spread and intensified over time, Solie's ecopoems aim to make "people aware of how our lives" have always affected "other lives, human and nonhuman." Had Ethernan's generation been more conscientious, had subsequent generations cared more about their impact on each other and the environment, perhaps the climate crisis would have been nipped in the bud. But it was not. Solie's works show

that it is now up to us to recognize how continuous economic expansion has produced the relentless cycle of ecological damage so that we can “get some place,” achieve “some transition,” stop replicating the irreparable destruction that we have produced thus far.

Conclusion

In her article for *Poetry London*, Solie contemplates the role of poetry in the age of the climate crisis. She considers the limits of poetry, its ability to contribute to climate activism. According to Solie, in the face of the crisis, "the bind poetry finds itself in… is one of limited means. What can a poem do?" ("Sing It"). "No one," writes Solie, "would argue that poetry, or art in general, is a sufficient response to the crisis, even fierce and overtly political calls to witness and act." What, then, is the significance of ecopoetry? What good can come of it? Or, is poetry dead? Solie answers these very questions:

> Poetry is not dying, nor is our sense that it is crucial. In times of crisis, personal or public, we reach for it. It has always been with us, as have our fears for its relevance. (Cyclical arguments as to the irrelevance of certain subjects or approaches deemed 'not poetry' or simply 'over' appear to be truly immortal.) We distrust poetry because it can't do what we want it to, what we need it to, yet we persist. It's our persistence as writers and as readers, in light of what poetry cannot do, that holds the key to what it can. To trot out everyone's favourite philosophical distinction, though poetry isn't sufficient, it may be necessary.

> Whereas Solnit observes that "Despair is often premature […] a form of impatience as well as certainty," poetry is a practice of patience and uncertainty. Its imperative is to clearly articulate encounters with the unclear, the unresolved, the indefinable. ("Sing It")

Solie knows that the role of the poet is limited. A poem on its own cannot effect the vast social, political, and legal change that the world needs to combat the crisis. Yet poetry "may be" a

"necessary" piece in the puzzle of climate activism. Because poetry can reveal hidden truths, "clearly articulate encounters with the unclear, the unresolved, the indefinable," ecopoems can expose the causes and the vast, interminable effects of the crisis on the individual level and on a global scale, and thereby also indicate the steps that need to be taken to reverse that impact.

Solie's poetry collections do just that. To encourage us to combat the crisis, her ecopoems convey a sense of urgency, a need to reframe humanity's relationship towards and perception of the nonhuman. But as this thesis illustrates, Solie's poetry collections themselves vary in their approaches to nature and climate change. Representing the strength and potency of the environment and its wild creatures, ecopoems in *Short Haul Engine* and *Modern and Normal* undermine the notion that humanity is superior to nature. In contrast, Solie's later collections—*Pigeon*, *The Living Option*, and *The Road in Is Not the Same Road Out*—depart from her early works' focus on unbuilt environments to represent the impact of built ones on nature. Finally, in *The Caiplie Caves*, Solie's ecopoetic canvas expands to contend with both the origins of the crisis and its global impact.

Over the course of Solie's ecopoetic oeuvre, her works become more political and ideological, more concerned with humanity's responsibility for climate change. However, together, all of her works dispel the illusion that humanity is separate from and grander than the nonhuman, natural world. Human endeavour is not detached from nature. Nor is humanity no longer reliant on the environment for survival. By simultaneously showing the power of nature and humanity's harmful and irreparable damage to the environment, her ecopoems force us to reckon with the effects of our technologies, to no longer ignore our role in the crisis.

Ecopoetry is not dead nor is it irrelevant. Solie's poems prove otherwise. While Solie recognizes that people need to "act outside of poetry," ecopoems can also draw attention to

environmental problems, inspire action, and thus create change (“Sing It”). In an interview, Solie cites poetry’s ability to irrevocably change its readers: for her, a good poem “communicates significance with which the reader engages intellectually and emotionally. It activates intuition, generating meaning, feeling, suggestion, implication, that may not be stated” (qtd. in Corkum). The urgency of the climate crisis demands that we critique our wasteful practices and the polluting industries that we rely on and inhabit through any means available to us so that we can eventually amend those issues. Solie’s works evince poetry’s ability to cultivate these criticisms while also emphasizing humanity’s connection to the natural world. As Solie writes in the conclusion to her essay on climate change, “if we have songs to sing, we should sing them now.” Her poetry calls on her readers to recognize their kinship with the nonhuman and end the perpetual battle between man and nature once and for all.

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