



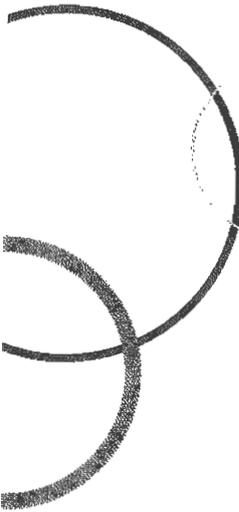
**Viz.**

**INTER-ARTS**

**INTERVENTIONS**

**A TRANS-GENRE ANTHOLOGY**

EDITED BY  
**ROXANNE POWER**



# Poetry, Ecology, and the Reappropriation of Lived Space

Laura Elrick

## Part I

In 1825, the great utopian socialist Charles Fourier “announced that he would be home at noon everyday to await a wealthy benefactor” who would be willing to provide funds for the founding of his new society.<sup>1</sup> This new society was to be based upon the idea of the phalanstere, a self-contained but non-oppressive community unit that would encourage the practice of something called joyous labor – quite a far cry from the society we now know as industrial capitalism, of which Fourier wrote scathing critiques, claiming it bred a poverty “born of superabundance itself.”<sup>2</sup> Such ideas were among his most fertile, and Marx and Engels would later develop them into a more systematic critique of capitalism, but Fourier also made much more fantastic claims as to what would constitute the new paradise on earth: androgynous plants would copulate, the North Pole would be milder than the Mediterranean, the oceans would be made of lemonade, and the world would contain 37 million poets “equal to Homer.”<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, Fourier waited and waited, eating his lunch alone for 12 long years before finally checking out.

Yet strangely, from the vantage point of the early 21st century, it now appears that the production of social spaces based on mutuality and the fulfillment of physical, material, intellectual, and spiritual needs is the far more fantastic notion, farther than ever from realization, while the seemingly outrageous ideas Fourier put forth are at least conceivable, if not just over the horizon. Indeed, androgynous plants do copulate (if you can call blasting the cells of one into another “copulation”); the Arctic ice shelf is melting at an alarming rate (the North Pole just might become warmer than the Mediterranean); the oceans will soon enough be made of lemon-scented toilet bowl cleaner if not Fourier’s more delightful sounding “lemonade”; and there are probably at least 37 million poets on the eastern seaboard of the United States alone, though it is a subject for debate which “Homer” we should be compared to.

But seriously, what might this torsioning capitalist “utopia” mean for an ecologically motivated poetry? I’d like, here, to at least touch on the explosion of cultural workers that has occurred since the middle of the last century. Geographer David Harvey relates that in New York in 1945 only “a handful of galleries” existed, with “no more than a score of artists regularly exhibiting.” In the decade roughly between 1975 and 1985, however, 150,000 artists began exhibiting “at some 680 galleries, producing more than 15 million artworks...” and this in New York city alone.<sup>4</sup> Clearly this number has only further increased in the 20 years since 1985, and though the specific figures here relate to the visual arts, I think we would all agree that a similar trend has occurred in poetry. In an attempt, however, to move

beyond the predictably disgruntled complaints about the proliferation of MFA programs on the one hand, and the seeming valorization of cultural activity for activity’s sake on the other, we might ask the question: What are we – all of us here today, beyond our myriad personal predicaments – what are we part of in a larger cultural-historical sense?

Interestingly – and I don’t intend to suggest a causal relationship here – at the same time we are seeing this huge proliferation in cultural production, we are also seeing a dramatic disappearance of species on the planet. In fact, the current biodiversity crisis is so severe that it is being called The Sixth Extinction (the fifth having occurred about 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs disappeared). Ours today is by far the fastest mass extinction in Earth’s 4.5 billion year history, happening now at a rate of approximately 30,000 species per year, a loss of about three species per hour.<sup>5</sup> The coldness of numerical representation does little to underscore the intensity of this tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Apparently not only is the author dead, but soon everything else at the top of the food chain will be too.

So, even if the relationship between these two phenomena is not causal, can we posit any kind of relationship between them at all? At the risk of stating the obvious, I’ll suggest that the link is the brutal extension of the reign of profit into every area of the globe, and not only physical spaces such as forests, glaciers, and oceans, but also into every facet of social life, so that where spaces don’t yet exist for the accumulation of profit, capital will find ways to create them.

Here again I turn to David Harvey’s argument in his expansive book *The Condition of Postmodernity* that it is exactly this maniacal drive towards increased profit that has transformed our perception of space-time over the last 30 years, and to such an extent as to have practically annihilated the experience of real space through the speeding up of time.<sup>7</sup> Satellites, cell phones, and Internet technologies, in addition to changing how each of us moves in the world (often times in a positive sense), also, if not primarily, speed up the transactions of capital. In short, as capital tries to deal with the recurring crises of over-accumulation (in which it has become so efficient at creating vast caches of consumer goods that there are not enough markets to buy them up), it seeks for ways to decrease the time between production and turnover into profit, so as to get an increasingly narrower “leg up” on the competition. In this hyper-competitive world, satellite information transfer renders 500 miles virtually the same as 500,000.<sup>8</sup> Such exponential compression is also experienced culturally, socially, and subjectively in all its disorienting effects, and it is exactly at such times, according to Harvey, that explosions in cultural production occur, as if the turn

to aesthetics is the only way to make sense of the forced rationalization of all life.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, this “annihilation of space through time” – the colloquial shrinking world of globalization – is the culmination of a rationalized abstract space, the space of developers and surveyors who posit it as an empty container, a Cartesian plane on which isolated objects can be moved around, as if on a blank template.<sup>10</sup> This is the power that arbitrarily slices up swaths of land into grids, represented on maps as mathematically arranged fragments, that become homogenous and universal in their qualities, literally parcels of space to be bought and sold as commodities. This is the divvying up of Africa (for European gain) into arbitrary states having nothing to do with already existing linguistic and cultural groupings, as well as the flattening of hills and the draining of creeks for the Wal-Mart parking lot. This is the production of space for and through private property, which not only pulverizes the land, but also our bodies, turning them into a compendium of features and parts, which are functionalized for various tasks according to their category. Penis, vagina, breast, ass. Wrist, elbow, finger. As Monique Wittig has written, “We are compelled in our bodies and our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us.”<sup>11</sup> Instead of conscious organism, our experience of the body has become one of inventory.

In this sense, profit is not only the deciding factor in specific “environmental” contexts (such as the decision by local governments in the northwest to sell their old-growth forests in order to finance their strategically underfunded schools; or of electronic manufacturers in Tijuana to dump their chemical waste on the street instead of building proper disposal and treatment facilities; or to speak more locally, of Exxon Mobil’s 30-year policy of silence around a 17-million-gallon oil spill in Newtown Creek that created a toxic underground lake beneath 55 acres of residential homes in Greenpoint, Brooklyn).<sup>12</sup> No, it is not just that the profit imperative has prevailed in these contexts, but that it has ordered and divided the very experience of the living body from itself.<sup>13</sup> We can no longer put our hopes into demands that capital make the “right” decisions – because ultimately, it can’t.

Here the true comedy of Fourier’s plea to men of wealth comes to light: he had some of the right ideas, but no understanding of the agent of change, which would not be men of property, but the laboring bodies themselves. In order to combat the spatial and temporal regime of profit, “We must,” as Neil Smith has so succinctly written, “face squarely the production of nature by human hands and defy the conventional, sacrosanct separation of nature and society.”<sup>14</sup> In this sense, an ecological cultural project would work not so much to *save*, but to intervene in what kind of nature will be *produced*.

## Part II

So where does this leave us as cultural workers of the poet variety? Is poetry primarily a textual practice? If we state that our goal is to create an ecologically-minded poetry based on textual maneuvers (such as a “further dismantling” of the I, or writing from a non-human stance... and in English, no less) then we risk replicating the mistakes of Romanticism, which served ultimately as a “rhetorical screen” behind which the economic, political, cultural and material devastation of the planet (both

human and non) occurred.<sup>15</sup> But equally (as Marcella Durand warns in her talk “The Ecology of Poetry” given at Small Press Traffic in 2002), “a poetry that too obviously [tries to] delineate the battles between bulldozer and bird” risks a kind of maximalist rhetorical staginess that empties out as soon as it comes on.<sup>16</sup> As we attempt to negotiate between what Lefebvre has called “the abyss of negative utopias, the vanity of critical theory which works only at the level of words and ideas” on the one side, and the “highly positive technological utopia, a realm of prospectivism, of social engineering and programming” on the other, perhaps it is necessary to shift our emphasis altogether.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Charles Olson meant to suggest just such a shift when he wrote that “what we [poets] have suffered from, is manuscript, press, the removal of verse from its producer and its reproducer, the voice....”<sup>18</sup> By this I don’t mean to propose a return to speech or a poetics of breath per se, but instead to suggest a possible grounding of poetics in spatial practices that challenge the “nature” of capitalist space, a practice that rejects the separation of our bodies from the spaces we inhabit.

There are a number of people already attempting such projects. Heriberto Yopez’ anonymous (yet somehow mysteriously personal) highway sign-posting project along the Mexican border; Mark Nowak’s readings and performances at union halls; Juliana Spahr’s (in collaboration with Stephanie Young) naked “paper” given at a recent conference in Los Angeles; Jonathan Skinner’s incipient ‘walk poetry’; Caroline Bergvall’s trans-linguistic vocables; Jeff Derksen’s theoretical-creative work on scale-shifting; Rodrigo Toscano’s recent synchronized works involving multiple readers; and Steve Benson’s improvisational movement-based performances – all interrogate and re-define the space of, by, and for the poetic acts of bodies.<sup>19</sup>

I would like to suggest here a further possibility for poetry – the exploration of what Henri Lefebvre has called “rhythm analysis,” which would investigate “spatio-temporal rhythms of nature as transformed by a social practice.”<sup>20</sup> Such a poetry would not engage in descriptions of space, nor in the classical musicality of the individual breath or line. Rather, it would enact an analysis of “space as social morphology.”<sup>21</sup> Through attention to acoustic and gestural movement (clusters, breaches, chains, gaits and even physiological “drives”) and especially the way they are traversed, “mobilized, carried forward and sometimes smashed apart” by institutional power and the state, such a poetics would develop the non-formal knowledge of the body, while becoming conscious that “the whole of (social) space proceeds from the body...”<sup>22</sup>

And here I mean “the body” not as discursive site, but as practice – in a non-Cartesian space of being-becoming – as the generator and producer of spatial reality through its movements repeated over time, both in terms of labor and in terms of ritual/cultural practices. Here, instead of “minds that move the bodies they inhabit,” we are embodied cognition.<sup>23</sup> We are subpersonal in the sense that we are not free wills/isolated subjects, but neither are we completely determined since we act in, on and through the shared manifold of the world.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, even the typically reductionist field of neurology is beginning research that suggests just such an intertwined and resonating bodily reality. Specifically, researchers are beginning to understand something they are calling the Mirror Neuron System. Basically, they have found that physically performing an action activates certain areas in the sensori-motor cortex of the brain, but that surprisingly, seeing someone else perform

the action activates those same sensori-motor areas – and not areas in the visual cortex.<sup>25</sup> This is entirely different from the typical input/output model of cognition we are used to hearing about, since it suggests “a unitary sensorimotor system organized around agentic activity and affect” – each of us might actually embody the acts of others.<sup>26</sup> Here we might truly speak of “vectors of co-participation” as we act to constitute each other.<sup>27</sup>

Though working in the early 70s, Henri Lefebvre foresaw something like this when he wrote:

The genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us – namely, the order of the body. Within the body itself, spatially considered, the successive levels constituted by the senses... prefigure the layers of social space and their interconnections. The passive body (the senses) and the active body (labor) converge in space.<sup>28</sup>

A poetry that challenges the relegation of cultural activity to the page or stage, one that engages and attends to the qualities of lived space, brings such a convergence into consciousness and contributes to the recovery of the total body. According to Lefebvre, “any revolutionary project today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda.”<sup>29</sup>

*This essay was presented at the Ecopoetics Panel held at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York in 2006; a slightly revised version appears in the Eco Language Reader edited by Brenda Iijima (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs & Nightboat Books, 2010).*

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> John Bellamy Foster, “The Renewing of Socialism,” *Monthly Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2005, p 2-3. 2. Quoted in Foster, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Kreis, “Lecture 21: The Utopian Socialists: Charles Fourier,” *The History Guide: Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History*, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/lecture21a.html>.

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), p. 290.

<sup>5</sup> E.O. Wilson quoted in Niles Eldredge, “The Sixth Extinction,” *ActionBioscience.org*, <http://www.actionbioscience.org/newfrontiers/eldredge2.html>.

<sup>6</sup> For a more poetic treatment of this see Juliana Spahr, *Gentle Now Don't Add to Heartache* (Sub-Poetics Self Publish or Perish, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, pp. 284-307.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 284. Another way to look at this change: since capital always needs to expand, there will be an increasing effort to find or create new areas from which to profit, and one such area is that of “cultural experiences,” or entertainment, which in its ephemerality provides an ideal source for the continual generation of profit. Though it may be arguable whether the realm of “poetry” directly contributes to this “fund”, we might still expect it to be operating under a similar cultural logic of disposability, which would require more production (and, hence, more producers).

<sup>10</sup> Jill Magi investigates the ideologies of such a space in her chapbook *Cadastral Map* (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Monique Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman,” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> For information on school funding and public lands see “State Trust Lands,” Stare Biodiversity Clearinghouse, a project of Defenders of Wildlife, <http://www.defenders.org/stares/factsheets/statetrust.html>; on the environmental impact of maquiladoras in Tijuana see “Border Toxic,” Environmental Health Coalition, <http://www.environmentalhealth.org/pubs-factsheets.html>; on the Newtown Creek oil spill see Deborah Gilbert and Genia Gould, “Class Action Suit Filed for Greenpoint Oil Spill Victims,” *Greenline: The North Brooklyn Community News*, Vol. XXX, No. IX, Nov 4-30, 2005, pp. 1, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Allison Cobb’s chapbook *Cell* (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, 2004), and Mary Burger’s *Sonny* (Leon Works, 2005) both explore this kind of alienation in relation to nuclear technologies.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Smith, in his Introduction to *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. xvi. Also available online at: [http://web.gc.cuny.edu/pcp/about\\_uneven.html](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/pcp/about_uneven.html).

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Novak quoted in Smith, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Marcella Durand, “The Ecology of Poetry,” Small Press Traffic, [http://www.sptraffic.org/html/news\\_rept/ecology.html](http://www.sptraffic.org/html/news_rept/ecology.html). Also published in *Ecopoetics 2*, 2002, pp. 58-62, <http://www.factoryschool.org/ecopoetics/>

<sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” in *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California press, 1997), p. 245. Also available online at: <http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/jarnot/olson.html>

<sup>19</sup> For Yepez see “Context and Signs of an Urban Visual Poetics,” in *Tripwire: a Journal of Poetics*, No. 4, Winter 2000-01, pp. 102-111, and images at Backlight Gallery at Factory School (<http://www.factoryschool.org/backlight/yepez/yepez.html>). Kaia Sand and Jules Boycoff have also done interesting projects with public signage – see their “Southern Maryland sign Project” in *Chain 11: Public Forms*. For Nowak see *Shut Up Shut Down* (Minneapolis: coffee House press, 2004). For Spahr and Young see the text of the paper at <http://people.mills.edu/jspahr/foulipo.htm>. For Skinner see the excerpt from “Sites of Writing: from Frederick Law Olmsted to Robert Smithson” at <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/olson/blog/SkinnerOlson.pdf>. For Bergvall see <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bergvall.html>. For Derksen see *Transnational Muscle Cars* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003), and recent collaborations and projects at <http://www.lot.at/ccs/noua.html> and [http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft\\_text.php?textid=1317&clang=en](http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1317&clang=en). For Toscano see “[Part 1 from] Truax Inimical,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2006, p. 50-51, and <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/toscano/>. For Benson see *Open Clothes* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2005) and sound files at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Benson.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Lefebvre, pp. 117, 205-206, 405.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 216, 405-407.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Steinberg, *The Fiction of a Thinkable World: Body, Meaning, and the Culture of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005), p. 41. Similarly, Lefebvre writes of “animated space” in *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> The term “subpersonal” comes from the work of Susan Hurley, and “shared manifold” comes from Vittorio Gallese, both neurologists whose work theorizes the implications of mirror neurons. See Vittorio Gallese, “The ‘Shared Manifold’ Hypothesis: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, No. 8, 2001, pp. 33-50, available online at <http://www2.unipr.it/gallese/Gallese%202001.pdf>; and Susan Hurley, *Consciousness in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> For a review of the literature on mirror neurons see Giacomo Rizzolatti and Laila Craighero, “The Mirror Neuron System,” *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, No. 27, 2004, pp. 169-192, available online at: <http://cloudbreak.ucsd.edu/triesch/courses/cogs1/readings/mirrorSystem-AnnRevNeuro-2004.pdf>. For the outlines of disagreement within the field of neurology regarding mirror neurons, see *Interdisciplines: What Do Mirror Neurons Mean?*, The European Science Foundation, <http://www.interdisciplines.org/mirror>.

<sup>26</sup> Steinberg, pp. 65, 68, and 70-75.

<sup>27</sup> Steinberg, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Lefebvre, p. 405.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.