



Reading Eco-crisis Poems in the Face of Environmental Crises in Reality: A Case Study

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Abstract

Ecocriticism has been a dynamic branch of literary studies from the late 20th century onward; the discussion of ecopoetry, however, seems to lag behind that of environmental fiction and non-fiction. This study aims to examine relevant messages and implications of selected ecopoems that specifically deal with environmental crises. Starting with a literature review of the definitions and elements prevalent in the field of ecopoetry and criticism, the study offers close-reading analysis of five contemporary poems about pressing eco-crises, covering the issues of chemical pollution, nuclear power plant disaster, and climate change in the Anthropocene. The selected poems are Olive Senior's "My Father's Blue Plantation" (Senior, *Gardening*, 1994), Shouji Mitsui's "A Different Version of 'A Record of the Living'" (Mitsui, 2014), Lavinia Greenlaw's "The Recital of Lost Cities" (Greenlaw, 1993), Craig Santos Perez's "Halloween in the Anthropocene, 2015" (Perez, 2016), and Carol Ann Duffy's "Parliament" (Duffy, *The Bees*, 2011). The findings include the shared features of ecopoems discussed, namely the stimulating perception about the environmental threats that is tinged with humor and satire, the sense of connectedness or entanglement between humans and the nonhumans, and the link to real situations as well as the projection of the future. Finally, the closing section reviews ecopoetry's accessibility, its modes of publication, and its potential to communicate the serious environmental risks that the earth and humanity are currently facing.

1. Introduction

Green plants, for example, are among the most creative organisms on earth. They are nature's poets. There is no end to the ways in which this concept can be applied to the human community... [I]f poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system. That is, they help to create creativity and community. (Rueckert, 1996, p. 111)

One of the problems of poetry criticism in relation to ecology and the environment is revealed in the above excerpt by William Rueckert, whose name is well-known among ecocritics as the person who coined the term “ecocriticism” in 1978. His essay contains a number of passionate expressions about the value of poetry, the energy of love in Walt Whitman, and the generosity of such poets as Adrienne Rich, Henry David Thoreau and Theodore Roethke. Nevertheless, the essay is grounded on a very abstract argument about the relationship between poetry and the biosphere, i.e. the stored energy that can pass from poetry to communities. It seems to be stuck in the impasse that Rueckert must end his essay with “I stop here, short of action, halfway between literature and ecology, the energy pathways obscured, the circuits of life broken between words and actions, the verbal domain and the non-verbal domain, between literature and the biosphere—because I can’t go any further” (1996, p. 121). In the past, at least in the context of English and American Romanticism, poetry has been influential in shaping people’s understanding of nature and cultivating reverence for the wilderness. Countless poems made valid criticisms against human greed and hubris, as well as industrialization, modernity and capitalism, which many take to be the causes of current environmental problems. However, to the 21st century readers, poetic depiction of nature and the environment from those periods can sound quixotic. For example, the wonder of solitary experience with nature according to Lord Byron may be enchanting:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
 There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
 There is society, where none intrudes,
 By the deep sea, and music in its roar:
 I love not man the less, but Nature more.

From *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Byron, 2004)

Yet it can seem outdated in a world where geographical discovery and increasing Internet connectivity have made these notions obsolete, while the concept of nature has been so thoroughly challenged and undermined by ecocritical scholars.¹ Thus, one might attribute the decline of nature poetry's influence on modern readers to the nature of poetry itself. Not only does it tend to distance itself from the real world, but it also demands time, concentration, and reflection in the world that is getting more rapid and, somehow, smaller. Besides, since natural landscapes itself have changed, vanished, or exploited beyond recognition, leading to people's disenchantment with the natural world, nature poetry seems to be of little relevance to readers today. In any case, the genre is believed to contain no political drive needed in today's environmentalist movement.

As a response to such contention, this article aims to examine the significant role, limitations and relevance of ecopoetry in the contemporary world, with the focus on five specific poems about ecological crises. Taking into account both their aesthetic and political messages, the author tries to offer a critical evaluation of the selected ecopoems and identify their shared qualities and what they have to offer for the serious ecological situations at present.

2. Literature Review

Ecocriticism emerged as a field of literary criticism in the last decade of the 20th century as more frequent and intense environmental calamities occur around the globe. Ecopoetry and its criticism have been developing in tandem with ecocriticism, though much more obscurely. It is no wonder that some of the earliest studies in ecocriticism deeply engages with nature poetry, e.g. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* (Bate, 1991).

¹ For example, see "Nature, Post Nature" (Clark, 2014).

The belief in the importance of poetry has been contested, however. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell maps out the characteristics of environmental literature, i.e. the significant presence of the nonhuman environment, the legitimate interest of the nonhumans, and human accountability to the environment. (Buell, 1995, pp. 7-8). While Buell cites a number of poems to support his description, he claims that the “so-called nonfictional works” are able to fulfill all his criteria better (pp. 7-8) and goes on discussing Thoreau as the reference point and *Walden* as a representative of American environmental imagination.

Despite some ecocritics’ dismissal of poetry, many scholars still believe that poetry is important and can contribute to the environmental cause. To begin, in the view of **Bryson (2002)** in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, the definitions of ecopoetry may remain fluid but should engage three principles. Ecopoetry is a group of nature poetry that emphasizes the ecocentric perspective, promotes humility toward the non-human world, and distrusts hyperrationality and the technologically modern world (pp. 5-6). Building on this, “Planting Roots: A Survey of Introductions to Ecopoetry and Ecocriticism” by **Maling (2013)** is a valuable and comprehensive launch into the study of ecopoetry criticism. Maling outlines some major works in the area of poetry ecocriticism and emphasizes the “fluidity of boundaries,” reliance on ecology, the vision of things “in concert—not in isolation,” and the global scope of ecopoetry (p. 1).

Another important contribution to ecopoetry studies is *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, in which its editors **Fisher-Wirth and Street (2013)** define ecopoetry as “poetry that addresses contemporary problems and issues in ways that are ecocentric and that respect the integrity of the other-than-human world” (p. xxviii). The two authors also categorize ecopoetry into three groups. The first is “**nature poetry**” which “considers nature as subject matter and inspiration” and is informed largely by romanticism and American transcendentalism. While being prone to anthropocentrism, nature poetry points out to the experience or the moment of contact with the physical world that leads to deeper understanding about life. The second group is “**environmental poetry**” which develops further from nature poetry but is more actively engaged with social and political environmentalism, such as environmental degradation, as well as concerns for human and environmental justice. Thirdly, “**ecological poetry**” is by far the most ambiguous one since it no longer deals with the content of the poems but the poetic form. The main

feature of this kind of poetry is its engagement with form and language, frequently experimental and self-reflexive about “how poems can be ecological or somehow enact ecology.” Fisher-Wirth and Street conclude that despite the weaknesses—nature poetry for its sentimentalized anthropomorphism, environmental poetry for its agenda-driven propaganda, and ecological poetry for its hyperintellectualism and emotional distance from readers—the three groups of ecopoetry can be equally powerful and important for ecocriticism and the environmental movement (pp. xxviii-xxix).

A more recent work is the article “Climate Change in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry and Poetic Criticism” by **Xie** (2023), which gives an overview on the historical roots of climate-related poetry by British and Irish poets up to the emergence of climate change poetry in the past few decades. Xie identifies four main characteristics of this collection of work, namely interdisciplinarity, multiple topics, environmental activism, and experimentation. He also proposes that climate poetry does not only feature the climate crisis but should also call for ecological responsibilities and elicit environmental activism (pp. 2-6), an addition to the previously cited definitions.

From these various definitions and arguments, it seems that ecocritics draw a clear distinction between “nature poetry” and “environmental poetry”; and the term “ecopoetry” is much used as the umbrella term and is at times used interchangeably with environmental poetry. These ecopoetic scholars agree that, apart from the experimental mode of poetic expression favorable to convey ecological messages, attention should be given to the representation of the external world or nature, either in its pure or devastated forms, ecocentric viewpoint, engagement with the present environmental issues, and the connectedness of beings in the ecological system. Now we examine how far these principles can be applied to the selected ecopoems related to environmental crises central to this research.

3. Methodology

In this study, the focus will be on ecopoetry concerning the pressing issue of environmental devastation, which is relevant to the current environmental situation and

which has only been lightly touched on by scholars so far.² While many critical works on ecopoetry tend to focus on selected authors or collections, this study will focus on only five poems presenting the ongoing eco-crises and their aftereffects. Arranged by the themes and scopes of areas affected, the poems are “My Father’s Blue Plantation” (Senior, 1994), “A Different Version of ‘A Record of the Living’” (Mitsui, 2014), “The Recital of Lost Cities” (Greenlaw, 1993), Craig “Halloween in the Anthropocene, 2015” (Perez, 2016), and “Parliament” (Duffy, 2011).³

Certainly, this single-text research approach cannot do justice to the bodies of poetic work around the globe and cannot provide a large picture of the developments in the fields of poetry and the environment. Yet by using only a few selected poems from various places of origin, the author hopes to offer a more in-depth analysis of the ideas and distinctive features of each work as well as the variety of concerns under the larger topic of environmental crisis. Due to the diverse subject matters, no single theoretical methodology is used across the five poems; other sources of information—such as excerpts from relevant scientific studies and news articles—will be incorporated to shed light on the situation and juxtaposed with the poets’ insights. Key points of discussion will include the kind of threats and crises presented in the poems, their contexts and representations, and the interrelation of the environmental problems with social, cultural, and political issues. Attention will also be given to significant poetic elements, such as imagery, irony, and sounds. This method of study will help illustrate the shared characteristics of the chosen ecopoems and, combined with an examination of the medium through which these poems are published or distributed, reveal a potential contribution of ecopoetry to the public’s understanding of environmental crises.

² See the aforementioned article on climate change poetry by Xie (2023) and “Confronting Catastrophe in a Warming World” (Rigby, 2014).

³ The author has not acquired the right to publish any of the poems. Please email the author if you wish to access the poems for non-commercial use.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1 “My Father’s Blue Plantation” by Olive Senior

This poem appears in the collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (Senior, 1994) which deals not only with the act of gardening but is closely tied to the author’s homeland, Jamaica, and its history and culture. Among other poems about colonial history, geopolitics, mythology, and a wide range of plant species and cultivation, “My Father’s Blue Plantation” stands out as it touches upon a contemporary ecological crisis of toxicity resulting from the use of chemical treatment in banana farming. Instead of addressing that topic directly, however, the speaker begins with a brief celebration and the visual impression of tropicity: “Gardening in the Tropics we revel in / Hot Tropical Colours” (lines 1-2). Then, “My father’s land / was blue” (lines 2-3), corresponding to the curious title but contrasting with the “Hot Tropical Colours,” a phrase that is repeated thrice in this short poem. The source of that unusual color is explained from line 5 to 8; blue treatment is applied to combat a disease. But the simple act indicates a greater relationship between crop production and violence in colonial history. Focusing on the combined issues of toxicity, the concept of Wastocene, and postcolonial and material ecocriticism, Ysabel Muñoz Martínez (2022) describes how the banana tree is one example of colonial commodities that generated radical transformations of the land.

Originally from southern Asia, it was first introduced to the Caribbean during the early stages of conquest and, in subsequent centuries, became one of the archipelagoes principal exports... [M]onocrop fields are likely to stimulate the spread of plant diseases, as was the case in Jamaica with Leaf Spot Disease due to the dispersion of the fungus *Mycosphaerella musicola* in the first half of the [20th century] (Hayden et al., 2003, p. 714). In response, the Jamaican government subsidized the spraying of copper sulphate and hydrated lime, also known as Bordeaux mixture, a blue-colored fungicide. (p. 169)

This chemical is one of the early methods to control the spread of the leaf spot disease, or black Sigatoka; yet it requires intense reapplication, resulting in greater exposure of farmers to the substance, both through skin contact and inhalation of the

dust. Therefore, the risk of chemical poisoning to farmers, both acute and chronic, is high. According to the New Jersey Department of Health, inhaling Cupric Sulfate (Copper Sulfate) can cause a sore and/or a hole in the “bone” (septum) dividing the inner nose. Repeated exposure may cause a greenish discoloration of the skin, hair and teeth. Other effects include damage to the liver and kidneys, and a possible damage to male reproductive system (New Jersey Department of Health, 2016, p. 2). Notwithstanding the serious effects of this fungicide, the speaker of the poem describes her father’s routine passingly. The equation between the blue produce and the promising income (lines 13-16) obscures the underlying destruction done to the land and the people obviously ignorant of harm.

In the second part, the setting shifts from the local Caribbean banana plantation, to the northern sphere. Snow and “northern light” (lines 23-24) replaces the greenish-blue tropical landscape, and the speaker now owns several pairs of shoes of all the tropical colors that she could not afford when young. A long time passes; the father’s banana plantation that used to “[come] right to our doorstep” (line 4) is now cleared, and the house is no longer surrounded by the thick “forest” (line 5) of blue leaves.

Alone, fanning sand and stoning breeze,
my father lets in all that air, lets that
Hot Tropical Sun pour down to fill his
blue lungs and warm his old and vegetating bones.

(lines 31-35)

Almost with a callous tone, the speaker distances herself from her father and what he undergoes “alone” (line 31) as she hears it at second hand: “(I’m told)” (line 28). Though the “Hot Tropical Sun” (line 33) probably remains the same as before, the air seems charged with certain invisible threats. The speaker’s father undergoes notable changes in his physical condition. No longer in his prime, he now sits “fanning sand and stoning breeze” (line 31); the latter phrase might recall the act of shooting the breeze, but it is more sinister and labored here. The line marks the beginning of the extraordinary coalescence of human agency and natural elements, combining his respiratory difficulty and the natural movement of air. Martínez perceives the intersection of the old man’s

alveoli with the chemical applied to the banana plantation as illustrating the “viscous porosity” of pollutants and bodies (2022, p. 170). This attention to the permeable boundary between the human body and the environment is indeed pertinent in toxic discourse and can be elaborated further. The image of his “blue lungs,” implying the severe effect of copper sulfate through inhaling “all that air,” is followed by that of his “old and vegetating / bones” (lines 32-35). This closing part, which emphasizes passiveness by the repeated verb “let” and the isolated final word, hints at the complete penetration of the toxic substance into the person’s core. Without openly saying so, the ending points to the symptom of toxic poisoning—perhaps liver or kidney diseases—that turns the man into a weak, lifeless person. Metamorphosed into the plant itself, his vital organs are turning blue and he is “vegetating,” not unlike those plants he had sprayed.

As Elaine Savory contends in her work on the Caribbean ecopoetics, postcolonial ecocriticism is “deeply concerned with the ways in which empire has abused and exploited both the people and their environment.” Poetry can also generate “aesthetic representation of the indissoluble bond between the fate of humans and the fate of the flora” (Savory, 2011, pp. 80-81). Savory’s comment, primarily addressing Derek Walcott’s poetry, can also apply to Senior’s text. “My Father’s Blue Plantation” shows the underlying connection between the degradation of the environment and the suffering of people living in it as a result of colonial exploitation. Beyond this superficial account of the busy daily life of the local farmers is the capitalist principle that dictates the monoculture system and the whole banana industry of the country. The way agricultural produce is sold on “Banana Day,” that is, to inspectors instead of to customers in a local market, only slightly touches upon the fact that the industry was completely controlled by foreign authorities.⁴

For Martínez (2022, p. 169), this reference to inspectors “uncovers the fragility of the commodity’s chain of production due to the perpetuation of the plantation as colonial structure. This I fully agree with and observe how the very system governs the desire of the speaker and her community in Jamaica, which is only realized later in the north as seen through her compulsive consumption in the second part (lines 24-27).

⁴ Banana plantations and trade in Jamaica have been heavily influenced by foreign traders and investors, especially from the US from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, and from the UK between the 1940s and 1950s. In the latter period, corresponding to Senior’s childhood, the British Government controlled the price paid to Jamaican banana growers (Hart, 1954, pp. 225-226).

While differing from the common toxic discourse found in other ecocritical works,⁵ Senior's poem still serves as a critique against chemical spraying. She draws an intricate relation between land and people, and between the colonial plantation and the larger economic system, subtly addressing the issue of justice in the process.

Last, one might note that the poem obscures the anthropocentric view of human ill-treatment of the environment. This is totally understandable as the poem focuses only on the personal plight of this one farmer family. But the frightful conclusion may encourage readers to extend consideration to the potential of toxic residue in bananas for human consumption and to other creatures probably affected by the heavy use of fungicide, the toxin being bioaccumulative and considered by the U.S. EPA to be "highly to very highly toxic to fish and aquatic life" (Boone et al., 2012). As it is, the speaker's conversational tone—neither urgent nor apprehensive—and the poem's seemingly serene closure can ironically expose the lurking danger behind the current, planet-wide practice of cash crop plantation and the effect of the chemical treatment on the local scale. In the end, it is the father of the speaker, forced to use such a harmful substance to answer the foreign demand for cheap bananas, who is made to bear the consequences. Even though the speaker does not participate in his suffering as "we children" (line 23) have successfully escaped from such an unnatural blue environment to a cleaner country, the last image of the man's debilitating illness lingers. On the whole, the poem not only signifies a frail human body ruined by the chemical, but also a severely contaminated landscape that has become uninhabitable for the younger generations seeking a new home elsewhere.

4.2 "A Different Version of 'A Record of the Living'" by Shouji Mitsui

The second poem "A Different Version of 'A Record of the Living'" by Shouji Mitsui appears in *Reverberations from Fukushima* (Mitsui, 2014), a collection of essays and poems by Japanese authors in response to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station disaster in March 2011. The editor Leah Stenson explains that the book is published in tandem with the anti-nuclear campaign in Japan. Topics in this collection include the attempt to come to terms with the tragedy, the description of the traumatic experience, the unheeded forewarnings about the defects in the power plant, the heartrending

⁵ Pastoral and apocalyptic images are often employed, and toxic penetration is usually portrayed as pervasive, inescapable, and irreversible. See Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Buell's "Toxic Discourse" (1998).

laments for the loss of the home and childhood memory, and an apology for the future generation and people outside Japan. Among these is an outstanding free verse by Shouji Mitsui, which describes the aftermath of the 3/11 disaster for the nonhumans and the inextricable link between the domestication of one species of animal and the nuclear power plant. The title can recall the 1955 film *Ikimono no kiroku* (or *I Live in Fear: Record of a Living Being*) by the renowned Japanese film director Kurosawa Akira, which deals with the atomic tests conducted by the United States and the Soviet Union (Sato, 2024). But in this “different version of a record of the living,” Mitsui turns to focus on the life and death of the birds instead.

In the first stanza, the speaker states that the dosimeter needle “now and then swings past the maximum” inside the 20-kilometer radius of the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant (lines 1-2). While people have to abandon everything and immediately evacuate from the area, animals remain in the zone. Domestic pets are left to become feral, and livestock locked up are left to starve to death and be the food for maggots. Some wild animals that manage to survive “ran free in the irradiated environment” (line 8). The second stanza takes a turn to investigate the ostrich farm, located just six kilometers from the power plant. After the disaster strikes, only a few ostriches survive and run free “as if they were in Africa” (line 24). But after about a year, six of them are caught, put to death, and used for research. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker spells out some of the slogans still hanging in “the ghost towns,” promising “a rich life” and “a prosperous future” (lines 29-31). Some signs celebrate the great necessity of atomic energy: “*Atom* for a daily-fresh conveyer belt sushi shop, / *Atom* for a pachinko parlor” (lines 32-33). Finally he concludes:

The animals sacrificed for the nuclear power stations are symbols of
us adults living today, and of our children in the future. (lines 35-36)

On the whole, the poem is straightforward in its criticism of the way people exploit the animals and discard them in the most irresponsible manner. In fact, abandoned pets and livestock are often mentioned in the event of serious fallout⁶ as victims that are left behind or exterminated later to prevent widespread contamination. The ostriches in

⁶ See “About a Single Bullet” (pp. 96-103) in *Voices from Chernobyl* (Alexievich, 2005).

this poem, however, have a strange history that is closely linked to the town and its nuclear power station. According to the news article from *The Asahi Shimbun*, an ostrich park was opened in 2001 to draw tourists to the region.

The reasoning behind TEPCO's bizarre move was that the high productivity rate of the bird species resembled that of reactors. An ostrich reaches adulthood within 2 years on a meager diet of wheat and corn, yet grows to 2 meters tall and weighs more than 100 kilograms. A female ostrich lays eggs for 40 years, starting from the age of 2. "This feature is similar to the characteristic of nuclear power plants that can generate a lot of electricity from a small volume of uranium fuel," reads a promotional pamphlet issued by plant operator.

(Ishizuka, 2019)

Figure 1

An ostrich was running wild in Tomioka in November 2011 with a collapsed house in the background.



Note. From Asahi Shimbun file photo. Copyright 2019 by The Asahi Shimbun Company.

Mitsui's poem echoes the above information in the second stanza. Said to be able to grow well with "only a small amount of food" (line 12), the ostriches were raised here to help the town "prosper" as the "symbol of the nuclear power station / that produced a great amount of electricity from a small amount of fuel" (lines 13-15). Additionally, before the tragedy struck, these ostriches were not just kept for meat, skin and eggs, but were, in Mitsui's words, "mascots for the peaceful use of nuclear power" (line 21). The ostrich park served as a friendly tourist attraction even though the landscape and the weather did not allow them to thrive. Then one year after the nuclear explosion, the birds were "deemed dangerous animals" (line 25); as a result, they were culled and studied. A subsequent scientific report about the radioactive contamination of these ostriches explains that, about four months after the incident, half the ostriches died. Some birds escaped from the farm and survived by eating "radiation-contaminated plants and insects and drinking standing water such as rainwater puddles" (Ogawa et al., 2015, pp. 203-204). The paper then reports the exact numbers of radioactive cesium in the tissues of each of the six ostriches dissected.

The poem offers a striking conclusion that the animals raised and "sacrificed" here symbolize the people living nowadays and the children in the future (lines 35-6). The comparison offers a sharp criticism of the way the company, for the sake of profit and positive image, exploited the animals and simply abandoned them to face the tragic outcomes. In the last moment, the animals' bodies were simply used as samples to further knowledge about lingering effects of radioactive poisoning. People are similarly sacrificed, though not as explicitly as these animals; they are made to suffer, to lose their home that becomes hazardous and uninhabitable, and to consume food and water of uncertain levels of contamination. But since the animals are made to suffer more from the incident as they cannot be evacuated, sheltered, or relocated, "A Different Version" becomes a harrowing testimony of the lesser known story of the animals made to live, breed, and die in the face of disaster, a tragic fate that they cannot avoid or protest. As opposed to the news article or the scientific study on the same subject, the poem manages to call for multispecies justice. It draws a startling connection—the shared vulnerability—between the nonhumans and the humans, now and in the future, who are asked to bear considerable risk for the promise of the unlimited supply of electricity.

4.3 “The Recital of Lost Cities” by Lavinia Greenlaw

In the near term, every region in the world is projected to face further increases in climate hazards (*medium to high confidence*, depending on region and hazard), increasing multiple risks to ecosystems and humans (*very high confidence*). Hazards and associated risks expected in the near term include an increase in heat-related human mortality and morbidity (*high confidence*), food-borne, water-borne, and vector-borne diseases (*high confidence*),... flooding in coastal and other low-lying cities and regions (*high confidence*)... Cryosphere-related changes in floods, landslides, and water availability have the potential to lead to severe consequences for people, infrastructure and the economy in most mountain regions (*high confidence*).

(IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023, p. 15)

Although Lavinia Greenlaw’s “The Recital of Lost Cities” was published more than two decades ago and is now widely anthologized as one of the earliest climate-change poems, her post-apocalyptic imagination never seems dated. The poem captures a cinematic image of large-scale flooding, only a step further from what has been reported in the latest IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2023) cited above. In “The Recital of Lost Cities,” it all begins with the world reaching that climate tipping point described as “a slight increase” in temperature (line 2). Then, in a startling combination of auditory and visual imagery, “the quiet / was shattered” (lines 2-3). The loud boom echoes the sound of the breaking of a ship, a symbol of human civilization and survival, just as the explosion of the polar ice caps would shake the ground on which we live—the foundation of our society. As the enormous ice calving occurs, the mountainous ice shelves in Antarctica, the largest of which belongs to Australia, “wandered all over the Norwegian Dependency” (lines 3-4), which is a connected territory in that polar region. This simple, wandering movement betrays an alarming and volatile scenario. As the ice breaks free and drifts—or more precisely melts and floods—over the globe, the subsequent geographical shift comes with land disputes and political turmoil. Civil disorder can also result from crop failure, famine, and the outbreak of epidemics. Borderlines are redrawn, and the remaking of nations are fraught with conflicts as lands are suddenly submerged,

with possible demographic changes ensuing. America is mentioned as “coming closer” (line 8) everywhere one goes. This can either suggest the radical and unexpected tectonic change—deemed the “continental shift” (line 7), or the influence of the great nation as well as its potential assertion of power during the vulnerable moment of mass migration and global rearrangement of dominance.

Just as the situation is seriously out of hand, Greenlaw shifts her subject and discusses the unprecedented situation for cartographers, who now produce commercial postcards as traditional maps are obsolete due to territorial changes. What stands out in this stanza is the sense of humor that borders sarcasm with the mention of “danger” (line 18) of people getting lost from the confusing maps and the past. Those old atlases not only indicate national boundaries and symbolize national and political order, but they also give the false reassurance of geographical fixity. So this mention can remind us of the fragile and arbitrary construct that has no chance to stand the ultimate reclamation of the natural elements. Finally,

The sea rose by inches, unravelled the coastline,
eased across the lowlands and licked at the hills
where people gathered to remember names (lines 19-21)

Through a series of personifications, water is now like a growing and threatening organism, powerful and indifferent. The sea rises constantly and erases the previous boundary between the ocean and land; it flows casually across the plains and waits to consume the higher grounds. The only areas left for humans to survive are the hilltops. Instead of closing the poem with scenes of chaos, an emergency evacuation, or struggle against food shortage or death, the poet turns to people’s gathering to commemorate and chant the names of the lost cities. These closing lines can be read as either solemn or ludicrous; it can be a serious religious mourning ritual or a futile attempt to rekindle people’s memory as more and more cities disappear. While the act may sound absurd, there seems to be something valuable, or even sacred, in the past and in those places. At the same time, the conclusion of the poem invites us to imagine the gravity of the situation and mourn the immense loss of humanity, perhaps also the loss of nonhumans and their homes, in those drowned cities.

Compared with the local environmental crisis in Senior's "My Father's Blue Plantation" or Mitsui's "A Different Version," the vision of Greenlaw is more global and foreboding. Despite the brevity in its poetic form, "The Recital of Lost Cities" manages to visualize the damages and challenges that will likely, or highly likely, occur in the near future as predicted by the IPCC. The actual warnings include further ice-sheet melt, retreat of glaciers, the climate hazards, diseases, flooding in coastal regions, and risks to ecosystems and humans in every region of the world. In the poem, the lost cities in the list scatter across the planet and include both wealthier and poorer nations. Many are famous as ancient sites of human civilization, and all are currently at risk from the rising sea level. While it might not be anticipated that richer nations in the north would suffer the same plight as the more vulnerable global south, at least the message is clear that eco-disasters will be the great, indiscriminate leveler, affecting multiple groups and regions simultaneously. Granted that human accountability and anthropogenic activities contributing to global warming are left unmentioned, the poem's sweeping closure encompasses the whole planet and can help generate a cosmopolitan framework and transnational perception much needed in environmental advocacy.

4.4 "Halloween in the Anthropocene, 2015" by Craig Santos Perez

The fourth poem to discuss is "Halloween in the Anthropocene, 2015" by Craig Santos Perez, published in *Poetry Magazine* in 2016. It consists of eleven tercets and addresses countless contemporary environmental crises placed in the context of Halloween night in 2015 and of the Anthropocene. The latter term, which has been a buzzword in Earth sciences, social sciences and humanities for about two decades, suggests a new chapter of the earth's condition in which humans play a decisive role in altering its geography, climate, and ecosystems.⁷ While several points about this era remain contentious among scientists, especially its inception and status as a new geological epoch, the term, when used in literary works, communicates a marked difference or a departure from the earlier or previously-known planet earth and human experience. Other significant implications are the global scope of the issues that are difficult to render, such as climate uncertainty and the wide-ranging human impacts on the planet. In Perez's poem, the concept of the Anthropocene does make Halloween—a common, annual celebration of fantastic guising and trick-or-treating—much more sinister and eerie.

⁷ See Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015).

The opening lines, "Darkness spills across the sky like an oil plume. / The moon reflects bleached coral. Tonight, let us / praise the sacrificed" (lines 1-3), clearly illustrate the setting of this horrifying world of lifeless and vastly contaminated landscape. The speaker goes on to describe the "sacrificed" one by one. Each of the young figures masquerades in fancy costumes, juxtaposing with the horrible experience they suffer. There are black boys forced to toil in hot cacao plantations in West Africa. A girl, dressed up as a Disney Princess and chanting "Trick / or treat, smell my feet, give me something good / to eat" (lines 5-7), is followed by the praise for the brown girls slaving in burning garment sweatshops. Boys dressed as ninjas, chanting the same but shortened "trick or treat" song, are accompanied by the description of Asian children laboring in toy and gadget factories. The mention of "suicide nets" (line 14) here evokes the grim reality of several workers in China driven to despair and suicide, a problem that the foreign factories solved by installing nets around their buildings (Ye, 2010). Next, the boys "camouflaged as soldiers" lead to the praise for "veterans who salute with their guns because / only triggers will pull God into their ruined / temples" (lines 16-19). This description simultaneously evokes the image of the child soldiers forced to fight in religious wars as well as the picture of mentally disturbed veterans who may decide to shoot themselves in the head to end their misery.

Next in the parade are kids dressed up as "cowboys and Indians" (line 20), mirroring the young indigenous people living in radioactive and toxic areas, "whose eyes are open-pit uranium mines" and whose "hearts are tar sands tailings ponds" (lines 21-23). The final figure in the procession is a boy "dressed as the sun" (line 24). From this point the poem takes a different turn to describe the worsened environmental conditions and threats, tearing down the image of mock festivity earlier. In the end, our praise shall go to El Niño, the dying Ocean, and "our mothers" of asthma, cancer clusters, miscarriage, lost habitats, fallout, and extinction (lines 25-32). The references to "mothers" may, together with the refrain "pray for us," echo words of worship from the Christian prayer "Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary," which fails to provide protection or spiritual comfort for the suppliant in this poem. "Mothers" here may also recall the traditional idea of nature as nurturing females but at the same time underline the idea of lineage; i.e. we are descendants of ancestors wrecked by toxic pollution and related diseases, from which we too will suffer. The children's Halloween chants grow shorter and shorter in each stanza, as if the singers themselves are cut short, leading to the last words:

— *pray for us* — because even tomorrow
will be haunted — *leave them, leave us, leave* — (lines 32-33)

Here the poem ends abruptly, unfinished, as if the speaker ceases in the middle of the prayer. This unclear last line may be a plea for the horrible or life-threatening conditions, the ghosts of death, or the causes of suffering to go away. Even so, the speaker seems well aware that on the next day, the people will still be terrified and anxiety-ridden as this Halloween will not end but will extend indefinitely.

One striking feature of this poem is Perez's dark projection of the Anthropocene mixed with an apocalyptic vision. It is a strange new world of severe contamination and despair. The poet also addresses the interconnected problems of environmental and climatic crises and the social, economic, and political ones. Since the victims in the poem's grim scenario and in reality are largely young and marginalized people, the issue of climate justice is raised together with social justice. The children's begging for treats can ironically reflect the reality of their starving and slaving for food. The dream of what they may aspire to be, manifested in the fancy costumes, is undercut by the references to their souls, indicating their passing or their suffering in the heat, the fire, the ruined landscapes or other scenes of destruction. Unmistakably, the poem also demonstrates the inextricable link between exploitation of the young and the poor *and* of the planet, which are simultaneously crushed by capitalism-driven production. The undeniable truth behind each scene—from real ecological disasters like oil spills, coral bleaching, and tailing ponds, to the nightmarish and brutal system of child labor, especially against the non-White children in third-world countries—turns this Halloween celebration into real and perpetual horror.

Last, addressing the challenge of ecopoetry representing climate change, Timothy Clark discusses the 'ecological' poetic that emerged in the development and extension of modernist techniques in the early 20th century. "At issue is an aesthetic interested in formal experimentation and the conception of the poet or poem as forming a kind of intellectual or spiritual frontier, newly coupled with a sense of the vulnerability and otherness of the natural world, distrust of a society dominated by materialism and instrumental reason" (Clark, 2011, p. 139). I believe that the poem "Halloween in the Anthropocene, 2015" can demonstrate an experiment in the poetic form, with disjunctive collages, partially incoherent allusions, and abrupt closing. It also functions as an

intellectual stimulation, exposes the fragility of both people and ecosystems, and criticizes the highly destructive mode of production in the contemporary capitalist society.

4.5 “Parliament” by Carol Ann Duffy

Published in the collection *The Bees* (Duffy, 2011), “Parliament” is an unsettling poem. Not only does it feature a jumble of sounds and images, creating a disjunctive montage, but it also envisions a troubling apocalyptic scenario. It is a projection of a world where all human beings seem to have passed, leaving only the consequences of their doings. Contrary to the real extinction threats in which bird numbers decline and human population expands, the poem presents a literally “posthuman” world where a score of birds gathers and exchanges what they saw. None of the pictures described are actually new to contemporary readers familiar with images of ecological devastation. For example, there are “*Stinking seas... A vast plastic soup*” (lines 9, 11) or the decaying waterscape covered with plastic waste; on land, there are all signs of ruin from deforestation, forest fires, and the loss of permafrost.

Similar to the issues in the previously discussed poems, the listed environmental damages and degradation are already widely publicized in the media. What is original about Duffy’s poem, however, is the way she portrays these images—through the perspectives of winged creatures. Joe Harper remarks that Duffy’s poem can be a “reworking” of Chaucer’s *The Parlement of Foules*⁸ (Harper, 2011). However, the relationship between the two poems seems flimsy. Despite the same word “parliament” in the titles—which can mean a group of birds and derives from *parler* [speaking], the content and the development of the two narratives are incomparable. The resonance of the old poem may ring fainter than the sarcastic comments on the current parliamentary meeting where none of the participants listens to the report of the devastation but indulges in their own business of noise-making.

In terms of sounds, Duffy constantly uses alliteration and assonance, e.g. “An owl grieved in an oak. / A magpie mocked” (lines 5-6) and “Chainsaw. Cattle. Cocaine. Cash” (line 30). Doing so, she manages to give life to each of the birds and invite contemplation on connections between the items listed. Despite their various emotions and testimonies, however, most of the birds display an attitude of suffering or death: “A bird of paradise

⁸ Written in the 1380s, *The Parlement of Foules* is a 699-line poem by Geoffrey Chaucer, in which birds gather and debate on the topic of mating on St. Valentine’s Day (Britannica, 2019).

wept in a willow” (line 13), “A stork shawled itself like a widow” (16), and “A bat hung like a suicide” (line 43). These distressful gestures may be linked to the ecological destruction mentioned and generate curiosity concerning the poet’s world-making.

Regarding that, Duffy’s opening phrase deserves attention. “Then in the writer’s wood” (line 1): the first word of the poem marks it as a sequel of a certain event. Although this might be an imitation to the way Chaucer often starts his new stanzas in *The Parlement of Foules*, the word “then” makes us conscious of the temporal connection with our world as well as setting up a distance between us and the congregation happening in the poem. On the other hand, the specific locality of this parliament is rendered surrealistic as the “writers’ wood” and the “written wood” (lines 1, 46). This challenges the boundary between the real ecological situations and the imaginative spaces where problems can be voiced freely by these non-human figures.

Figure 2

“The Parliament of Birds” by Carl Wilhelm de Hamilton visualizes a startling, chaotic scene in the middle of nowhere. The bleak atmosphere and the bedlam make it an apt visual depiction for Duffy’s poem.



Note. From *Wikimedia Commons* (Public domain), by K. W. de Hamilton, (18th century), (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Carl_Wilhelm_de_Hamilton_-_The_Parliament_of_Birds.jpg)

Because this parliament occurs in the poet's wood, birds can be extremely vocal and many sorts of noises are uttered—an antithesis of the world where “no birds sing” in the epigraph of Carson's *Silent Spring*. For example, a gull, which can dive for fish, reports a glimpse of bleached coral reefs and the silent ocean with no “language of fish” (line 20). The underwater silence is attributed to “Oil like a gag / on the Gulf of Mexico” (lines 22-23), connecting this fantastic world to a real location where at least three major oil spills occurred, the most severe of which was the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. Other birds utter jolting and terse phrases, like “The macaw squawked: / Nouns I know” (lines 27-28), followed by a list of items that reflects tension between the landscape and destroyers. The crane's report, “peat broth; seepage; melt; / methane breath” (lines 41-42), explains the process whereby peatlands release the dangerous greenhouse gas while peat is harvested (IUCN, 2017). The phrase generates a clear imagery of the bubbling wetland that is quite alive, adding to the worrisome release of methane from the thaw of the permafrost (lines 38-39).

The noisy exchange of information starts off unpleasantly enough since all the birds “crowed the leafless trees” (line 3) and each makes impatient, harsh noises and frantic gestures as they share the hopeless scenes they witnessed. Their discourse lasts until darkness and snow descend, and finally “the albatross⁹ / telling of Arctic ice / as the cold, hard moon calved from / the earth” (lines 50-53). These last two lines show Duffy's highly imaginative power that should chill readers' blood. The changes, so far at the global level, seem to have wiped people out from the face of the earth; and now that shift has reached an extraterrestrial level. This strange scenario, i.e. the detachment of the moon from the earth, may be related to the spirit of a woman or a living moon in

⁹ A comment from an insightful peer reviewer of this article draws attention to the choice of the last bird, the albatross (line 50), as an obvious allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which may indicate that this 21st-century ecopoem is an extension or a continuation of the Romantic tradition instead of a separate or new subgenre of poetry. This is a pertinent line of interpretation; although the albatross in Duffy's poem is describing the image of the Arctic ice—and not the Antarctic, the concept of nature both as a victim of human whim and arrogance and as the great force that can bring humankind to an end is profound in both poems.

another poem of Duffy's,¹⁰ in which the moon gazes down on humankind's absolute failure to sustain the earth, to her great disappointment. Or it might have something to do with "the Arctic ice" (line 51), which is mentioned right before the clause. Due to some significant cryospheric changes, the earth's gravity may be suspended, the balance lost, or the world may be about to fall apart as the tidal patterns get so upset. Possibilities abound; but in any case, the apocalyptic vision is fully materialized and readers are left to contemplate their share in the collapse of the earth's system. After all, the purpose of apocalypse literature lies not in the striking of fear and despair, but rather in the invitation for readers to grasp the extent of the far-reaching consequences of their actions. Such a fantastical sketch might have no scientific bearing to the real environmental situations and might have been slighted as panic-mongering, yet it can encourage thinking and generate debate. Importantly, Duffy's poem is fresh and surprising because in the most direct sense it adopts an ecocentric perspective. Transcending human concerns and anthropocentrism, this eco-poem illustrates the possible outcomes of our doings without blaming anyone. It can arrest us fully through its creative imagination and vivid sounds and imagery of the futuristic world without us.

5. Discussion

It is difficult to draw an encompassing conclusion for eco-poetry as a subgenre of literature due to the diverse subject matters, distinctive styles, and the unique ways that poets visualize the complex causes and consequences of environmental crises. What is clear, however, is the shift of concerns of eco-crisis poetry from celebrating nature to the current environmental realities. Each of the poems shows the severity of the ecological catastrophe on different levels, from the local or regional problems of toxicity and radioactive contamination to the worldwide deluge and the post-apocalyptic earth that no longer sustains life.

¹⁰ "The Woman in the Moon," a fantastical poem spoken by a woman living on the moon, closes with "Devoted as words to things, I stare and stare; / deserts where forests were, vanishing seas. When your night comes, / I see you staring back as though you can hear my *Darlings*, / *what have you done, what have you done to the earth?*" (lines 13-16) (Duffy, 2008/2013, p. 58).

Despite the totally different scenarios and contexts, I propose three important features that are shared in the selected verses. **First, these eco-crisis poems engage with the novel situations and present images of crises, utterly bleak in themselves, in a unique and creative way, often with wry humor and satire at its core.** Due to the seriousness of the situation, these poems cannot help but largely reflect misery and anxiety, or sometimes apathy, with little didacticism and optimism. But to offer balance for the grim situations, the poets may add a pinch of humor. For example, while portraying a serious image of destruction, Greenlaw adopts a calm, laid-back tone similar to Senior. In fact, the two poems are charged with a light-hearted cadence and ends in a similarly resilient, though somewhat powerless, image of survivors. Also, since environmental disasters are sometimes fraught with injustice and delayed or inadequate responses from the authorities, the poets may move beyond dark humor to satire, which is often a mainstay of eco-crisis poetry. This characteristic is notable in Perez's depiction of children's suffering through the Halloween's motif, and in the slogans of the safe nuclear energy in Mitsui's poem. As a result, these poems do not simply convey a sense of despair or resentment, but also provide new insights, criticism, and stimulating perspectives about the environmental threats and consequences.

Second, a shared characteristic among these poems is the sense of connectedness, or the entanglement between humans or cultures and the nonhuman. Timothy Clark claims that the ecopoem is "often conceived as a space of subjective redefinition and rediscovery through encounters with the non-human" (Clark, 2011, p. 139). And in each of the five poems, shifts in meaning and experience are indeed exposed through the nonhuman dimension, whether it be the blue plantation, the ostriches, the ever-rising water, the thoroughly contaminated landscapes, or the meeting of birds. I also agree with Chao Xie that climate change—or in fact environmental problems nowadays—is "more than a mere ecological issue, rather, it encompasses social, political, economical, and ethical dimensions" (Xie, 2023, p. 5). This can well explain the multiple issues found in the poems, especially justice, economic dominance, postcolonial conditions, and politics; yet the chosen texts, taken out of their collections and analyzed as stand-alone pieces here, may not show clear engagement with environmental activism, which Xie also emphasizes. For the most part, we see how an issue may have a trivial start: a casual spraying of fungicide in a farm, a slight increase in temperature, or the production of electricity in the theoretically safe nuclear power plant. Yet these seemingly insignificant actions or conditions develop uncontrollably into much more serious damages, exposing marginalized people and animals to risks without redress.

Third, these ecopoems are all well embedded in the physical and environmental realities. Most are related to specific cases of environmental crises that many readers are already aware of. Sometimes the poets may refer to real places or incidents, such as the Fukushima disaster or the oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico. More frequently, the authors mention well-known environmental destruction in general, such as polluted landscapes, natural disasters linked to anthropogenic global warming, coral bleaching, and extinction. While some might propose that these images and facts are there to generate environmental awareness in general, I argue that the stories are not at all new and may not be intended to spark activism as much as to surprise readers with new facets, meanings, or experiences of those catastrophes. Poets can turn familiar stories, i.e. toxic contamination in farms or mass flooding, into much more vivid and stunning images. They can present the connections of seemingly unrelated occurrences, through creative imagination, better than news or scientific papers. Ultimately, these eco-crisis poems give us a vision of the future, or the aftermath, of the environmental disasters. They are post-apocalyptic in a way that they show a world *after* some great disasters happen, though those “after” might not mean that the crises have “ended.” In most of the poems discussed, except Duffy’s, people *are* living *with* the catastrophe, that is, with the unknown and uncertainties that dominate that new world.

As stated earlier, the appeal of nature poetry has significantly lessened in the contemporary world, and poetry as a genre that deals chiefly with fine language, abstract figures of speech, and intricate sounds may seem to some readers to be of little relevance to the real crises. Even so, most ecocritics in the literature review section above make one similar claim about the vital use of poetry, but it is not the power to inflict governmental changes, effect new policies, or even drive people on the street. As Fisher-Wirth and Street (2013) put it in the preface of *The Ecopoetry Anthology*:

The environmental crisis is made possible by a profound failure of imagination. What we humans disregard, what we fail to know or grasp, is easy to destroy: a mountaintop, a coral reef, a forest, a human community. Yet poetry returns us in countless ways to the world of our senses. It can act, in Franz Kafka’s phrase, as “an ice axe to break the frozen sea inside us,” awakening our dulled perceptions and feelings. This is the power of all poetry. With regard to the environment, it is particularly the power of ecopoetry. (p. xxvii)

I beg to differ slightly with the above statement and would argue that: sometimes it is *not* that a person do not know or cannot imagine the things or the people they are destroying that they destroy them. I maintain that most environmental problems are not new, and that ecopoetry might no longer be just about raising awareness. The media are already helping to communicate the issues and bringing them to the forefront; ecopoetry, on the contrary, is there to propose a more complex interrelationship between people, culture, and the environment. *That* may or may not generate changes in people's behaviors or serve any practical goals, but poetry should compel readers to ponder. At least theoretically, eco-crisis poetry ought to open a new eye in us, one that is perceptive and alert to the environmental reality at present and in the future.

Importantly, however, before a poem can touch a reader's mind, there remains the question regarding the accessibility of the ecopoems, i.e. *the reach of poetry* through various modes of publication.¹¹ This issue seems to have escaped most scholars so far,¹² yet it is hard to deny that ecopoetry anthologies and poetry collections may not be very popular among common readers. For this reason, how widely each poetic work is published and accessed is very important.

As for the texts chosen in this research, Senior's "My Father's Blue Plantation" is taken from her poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics* (1994) and does not belong to any environmental collection. Mitsui's (2014) "A Different Version" is even more limited in terms of publication as it appears specifically in the collection *Reverberation from Fukushima*. The other three poems are more widely circulated. "The Recital of Lost Cities" is included in *Anthologise: The Poetry of Earth is Never Dead*, published in 2013, which is a result of the "Anthologise" competition that gave school students a chance to select poems to be included in this anthology. Perez's "Halloween in the Anthropocene, 2015" is listed in the website Poetry Foundation's section of "Poetry and the Environment."

¹¹ The accessibility in the sense of comprehensibility of the poem also deserves attention. Allowing that poetry is a most expressive genre of literature, and that as a piece of art a poem has no obligation to be thoroughly unambiguous, one must still admit that the difficulty and ambiguity of ecopoetry may stand in the way for popularity and wide readership, as well as the ensuing environmental engagement that one might wish it to achieve.

¹² Xie (2023, pp. 9-10) has discussed this issue well, but his work focuses only on contemporary British and Irish poetry.

Last, “Parliament” is a part of the Guardian’s project “Keep it in the ground,” featuring news articles, stories, and poems regarding climate change and pollution. Combined with powerful images and at times poetry readings from celebrities, ecopoems from this website have very high accessibility and attractiveness.

In future discussion of contemporary ecopoetry, attention can be given to the widening of the poetry readership, the enhancement of ecopoetry’s accessibility, and its relevance to modern readers and situations. From the sources listed above, authors, publishers, and project organizers can consider more engagement with school children and with communities suffering from ecological crises, and perhaps consider more global, visual, or digitized platforms to promote the work. Another important challenge would be the way to embrace poets, readers, and critics from more regions. The limitations of the ecocritical field—that most theoretical work focuses on Anglo-American literature, or that ecopoetry textbooks and anthologies are limited to only modern and contemporary American poets—have been noted by several scholars. Yet even more difficult would be the means to communicate the truly global framework of the environment crises, especially from and to non-English speaking regions. This is one specific problem I encountered while trying to access ecopoems from Japan. It might not be helpful to underline that poetry is the most difficult texts to translate due to its sound features, linguistic structures, and cultural-specific imagery; nor would it help to stress that poetry has a relatively smaller readership and can be harder to sell than other forms of writing. Even so, the strength of poetry remains its conciseness, which makes it easier to appreciate and pass on, its potential to transform people’s perspective, and its ability to deeply engage with people’s feelings. We must accept that ecopoetry can never be a panacea for the mess humans have done to this world. What we can be sure of, however, is that the poets’ often-surprising portrayals of the dreadful situations, combined with their remarkably discerning perception, are a delight to read. Eco-crisis poetry in particular enables a new mode of thinking inside us, a mode that is grounded on interconnections and multispecies understanding. So, most brilliantly it has a potential to challenge our default frames of thought, both spatial and temporal, and our position in the ever-shifting, global ecological scheme.

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