


Article

21st Century North American Ecocriticism: The Contestation of the Post-Human Condition in *Political Cactus Poems* by Jonathan Skinner

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ABSTRACT

*In the North American poetic context, the exchange of a recognized ontology based on the concept of nature as an extra-human universe and its concomitant poetic epistemology are highlighted in contrast to the devastating results of modern capitalism. Besides this, ecocriticism's place in the United States community of poets offers the possibility of generating a new concept of transnationalism. An antihegemonic and deconstructive metalanguage is born from ecocritical poetry as an expression of a possible paradigm whose goal is to serve as the vanguard to a confrontation with a majority sociopolitical current. An example scarcely studied or recognized in the environment of the Portuguese language, yet whose presence falls in a propitious moment for the expansion of studies on ecocritical literature at a transnational and global level, is the North American poet Jonathan Skinner. His first collection of poems, *Political Cactus Poems* (2005), reveals a novel, extra-human epistemology in which nature recovers its primacy by way of the expression of a natural ethic.*

Keywords: Ecocriticism. Jonathan Skinner. American poetry.

Recebido em: 27/10/2022

Aceito em: 04/01/2023

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How to cite:

SIMON, Robert. 21st Century North American Ecocriticism: The Contestation of the Post-Human Condition in *Political Cactus Poems* by Jonathan Skinner. *Gragoatá*, Niterói, v. 28, n. 61, e56320, mai.-ago. 2023. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.22409/gragoata.v28i61.56320.en>

A notable variety of themes presents itself under this delineation, such as the study of the so-called “dark tourism” (CARRIGAN, 2014, p. 243) and the dialectic of poetic achievements related to the global crises caused by the fragmentation of the balance of nature in the Anthropocene, “[...] eco-poetics: the poetics of people sundered from a natural context, seeking return; strategies of compensation for cultural/ linguistic pressures toward fragmentation” (ARNOTT *et al.*, 2012, p. 84). The exchange of a recognized ontology based on the concept of nature as an extra-human universe, and its concomitant poetic epistemology, are highlighted in contrast to the devastating results of modern capitalism.

Besides this, ecocriticism’s place in the United States community of poets offers the possibility of generating a new concept of transnationalism: “Nature and the biosphere when seeking to re-anchor American Studies within a more transnational and comparative framework” (BELLARSI, 2009, p. 72). An anti-hegemonic and deconstructive metalanguage is born from eco-critical poetry, as an expression of a possible paradigm whose goal is to serve as the vanguard to a confrontation with a majority sociopolitical current, the ultimate expression of the Anthropocene’s false dominance:

[...] [e]cocritics have attacked anthropocentrism and the centrality it accords to man (more often so than to woman, tellingly enough) in the realm of creation – a central place repeatedly invoked over time to legitimize the subordination, abuse, and erasure of the non-human ‘other’. Along a broad spectrum ranging from less to more radical stances, ecocritics seek to displace anthropocentrism in favour of ecocentrism ... and to substitute interdependence and exchange for subordination. If ecocriticism shares with postmodernism and post-structuralism some of their discontents with Modernity, ecocritics have, however, also felt compelled to distance themselves in part from some of the excesses and more extreme positions of postmodernism and deconstruction, as well as from the ethical relativism which these other critiques of the Modern may seem at times to condone in connection with the environment. (BELLARSI, 2009, p. 74).

Thus, the desired goal, in principle, is conceived as the discovery, by way of poetry, of the relationship between humanity’s actions and the Earth, in which the results of those actions’ debris forge a rough landscape without a certain future:

Some of this poetry addresses conceptual challenges of the Anthropocene, such as the difficulty of grasping the scale of humankind’s planetary impact in relation to deep time, while some confronts material problems, such as the damage toxic anthropogenic chemicals and materials such as plastic do to human and environmental health (KELLER, 2017, p. 3).

In this, one may take stock of the recognition of humanity’s dialectic, and concomitant dependence, with nature, the latter being a whole universe built as extra-human nations:

[...] even if human communities continue to differ as to how they see the relationship between Nature and Culture and as to the kind of ecological imprint they leave upon their environment, no human society has historically existed completely independently from Nature, be it at the material level or the one of cultural representation. No societies or individuals can entirely extirpate themselves from the exchange between the human and the non-human (though, admittedly, the myriad forms taken by this exchange defy attempts at universal generalization). On the other hand, Nature actually turns out, in certain respects, to be one of the most ineluctably transnational realities of all." (BELLARSI, 2009, p. 72).

Perhaps these link with that patent binarism of human debris and the supposed purity of the natural world, as the evolution of ecocritical poetry in the United States would suggest:

The tenacity of Romantic perspectives on nature and the human relation to it fostered an ongoing sympathy among early ecocritics for the ideas and feelings expressed in poetry from that tradition. Environmental critics writing in the late decades of the twentieth century responded to what was perceived as the continually increasing separation of industrialized humanity from nature much as the Romantic poets themselves did nearly two centuries earlier: by lamenting that split and by treating poetry as a means of transcending it. (KELLER, 2017, p. 10).

In other words, poetry turned exclusively toward nature without delving into critical discourse, in a similar way to that which recent generations of poets in Portugal have in terms of the acerbic 21st Century sociopolitical discourse's superficiality, is resolved through a palpable epistemological insufficiency (SIMON, 2011; KELLER, 2017). It is under this teleological approach that many poets, beginning in the mid-Twentieth Century until today, dedicate their work to the opening of this relational problematic to a wider reading public, "[...] highly distinctive intervention into debates on the Anthropocene has vital relevance for the critical, ecopoetic discourse and the environmental humanities more broadly" (BLOOMFIELD, 2019, p. 132). At the root of this criticism of contemporary poetics, North American ecocritical poetry attempts to move toward an opposite position, toward a deepening of the contribution of natural symbolism through their primacy in relation to humanity.

A little studied or recognized example in the Portuguese Speaking World, yet whose presence happens at a propitious moment for the expansion of ecocritical literary studies on a transnational and global level, is the North American poet Jonathan Skinner. He was born in 1967 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, and earned his Doctorate in Literature at SUNY-Buffalo in 2005. After several years as a Professor of Environmental Studies at Bates College, he took his current position as Professor of English and Comparative Studies at the University of Warwick. His first collection of poems, *Political Cactus Poems* (2005),

reveals a novel, extra-human epistemology in which nature takes back its primacy through the expression of a nature-based ethos.

Critical approaches emphasize how Skinner's work, according to his own elucidation to that respect, reveal that "[...] ecopoems may extend from the topologically referential to ethnological" (BELLARSI, 2009, p. 79). The growth of ecological poetry, thus, happens at the margins, and even outside, of the limits imposed onto the notion of a trajectory focused exclusively on the environmental crisis. In a 2012 interview, Skinner explores the relationship of conceits that inform the reader on the notion of an ecocritical poetic:

Ecopoetics, as I understand it ... is the pursuit of connections that reach beyond the human sphere of interest and also, I think, beyond the frame of the artwork or poem. At the same time, ecopoetics acknowledges disconnection—how we are both connected to and disconnected from the environment. Focused on crossing, ecopoetics explores the difficulties and opportunities at the boundary. (SKINNER *apud* HUME, 2012, p. 754-755).

This ontological movement at the margin of recognized limitations in contemporary poetry surges onto the most visible level of poetic expression in Skinner's work, as can be seen below.

A poem published separately from his collection inverts the discourse of sensitivity toward the criticism of capitalism, an essential, although not necessarily unique, element of contemporary Neo-Liberalism:

Ecotrigger Warning:

Please be advised: this poem
may contain references to
environmental destruction. It might
suggest inferiority of the Homo
sapiens. Although you may not feel
formally threatened by this poem
your concern for fellow humans
who could fear for their safety
prompting very public reactions
might upset you. Poetic forms
can be violent, traumatic: your life
beyond this poem, unexpected,
misunderstood, might be in peril.
Your learning could be disrupted.
If you have known colonialism
you might be triggered. This poem
is liable to make you squirm.
Very possibly, rising temperatures
will make us change our lives.

(SKINNER, 2015, p. 195).

The poem above begins imitating an official advisory message, a technique noted among postmodern poets as a deconstructive/

denaturalizing element. Nonetheless, by way of sharp irony, it expresses various essential concepts of ecocritical discourse. It emphasizes ecological activism as a threat to power structures, not from a collective point of view, but rather from the perspective of the individual partner with an unquestionable human hegemony. From this moment, the poem, and specifically, the poetic word, becomes an explicit weapon against the dangers of the normalized destruction of the environment. In the final five verses, the idea of this process' disruption attracts the historical notion of colonialism as a starting point for the dismantling of humanity's own colonialism of the environment, presented in this and other poems in opposition to human presence. It is in this way that readers are able to comprehend the "human/non-human" dichotomy that the poetic voice establishes.

Among the various themes which pervade Skinner's work, one may include the approach to human presence as an interference in the natural world. In the poem "Mined," for example, there is a series of philosophical quests whose starting point is a natural or human object, which participates in this dialog in some form, the poetic voice explains that: "[...] 'the British consulate donates these / bedbugs to the next resident/alien or ancient, a vocal matzoh / to this world of trash and plastic / the squirrel in a window of light [...]" (SKINNER, 2005, p. 14). Human action becomes an infestation for this space's future residents, and if we are to understand this space as a microcosm (which would be logical given the presence of this poetic technique throughout the collection), the metonymic relationship of the human being and the bedbug lays the groundwork for the symbols, charged with critical significance, that follow. Matzoh, a type of Jewish, unleavened bread, yet with strong and essential cultural and religious significance for the Jewish people, responds to human actions with a cry of warning to nature that humanity is attempting to close in and, thus, to be aware of the situation. It is resolved with a cry out to distance human societies as creators of "trash and plastic," and as such, destructive.

A problematizing of humanity's posture toward nature appears in the form of the theme of nature's transformation into the abject following the human invasion of extra-human space. This imposition happens as much historically as in the present day, according to the collection's poetic language.

As an example, the following verses trace the destructive, human trajectory from the perspective of nature: "I don't see any hope/year after year, another ergot/epidemic in the colonies/if you remember me, spurned/by the worldly vanities / in an elegant but weather-/beaten frame - unlike Priam / I had no orifices. this is sick." (SKINNER, 2005, p. 12). These verses are a poetic expression of desperation brought about by the cycle of nature's destruction. This grotesque act comes to its unhappy end through the actions and presence of humanity. The appearance of Priam, a mythological figure of the last king of Troy, killed by the son

of Achilles, as a point of comparison with the environment's suffering, is intensified by the lack of "orifices" for the release of a cry for help or a call for attention. The siege of nature, then, is realized in a sickening violation of the environment's concrete, physical rights.

The subsequent step toward the description of the process of human appropriation of the natural world is presented via the criticism of humanity by the crisis brought on in the world outside of the human sphere. The poem "Niagara" illustrates this critical evolution:

measure wet splashing pool
frayed on the smooth
gestures inside impassive
catches, tributary shifts
stolen from the big cool
opposing forces at notched
meeting places, matter's clatter
earth pummelled [sic] with life
some four odd billion years.

(SKINNER, 2005, p. 27).

The appreciation of nature is palpable in the poem. The feeling of the water's movement, the opening of a droplet onto the many ends to which the rocky space's natural flow permits entry, is expressed. Many contrasts, in turn, exist and prosper in this primordial environment. The solidity of the rock orients and simultaneously rejects the power of the water's agility. Life then imposes itself, described as an object that "pummelled" [sic] the planet's surface, in contrast with the passiveness of space. These images of fluvial water engender an allegorical moment of life's struggle for survival on a planet in perpetual change and decadence.

Nonetheless, another poem from the same section, "Wind", reveals a possibility for rebirth in destruction, offered by the same nature that humanity looks to undermine:

Étretat
at eyrie in grasses
thrushes braced for night
look out as far as sea
to a world in prickly
connivance of wind and sprouts
pulled into tufts of air
what is liquid is a friction
aggregates compiled sound".

(SKINNER, 2005, p. 30).

The scene describes the cliff close to a town of the same name, Étretat. It should be noted that the physical space of the audacious escarpment shines with the white of alabaster. The wind, impervious to the geological evolution of the planet, is presented as an invisible liquid. A dialog is established between these symbols, mediated by the poetic

voice. Thus, the contrast within the constructive and destructive waters is discovered, collaborating with the wind, which molds the environment. There is also the first mention, although indirect, of the cacti (“prickly / connivance of wind and sprouts”), which serve as an object of poetic study in the second part of the collection.

Anthropomorphism of the cacti is blatant in these poems. It also makes sense given Skinner’s predilection for personification as a bridge of understanding for human conceptions of (what could seem to the human consciousness as) an alien nature. For example, in “Ariocarpus Fissuratus” (SKINNER, 2005, p. 55), whose name comes from the scientific name from a short, round cactus from which a sole, purple flower is borne, exemplifies this approach that, from the poetic point of view as expressed in this study, may only be classified as “transcultural”:

Aryan theories hold that
a carp gave birth to Adam
deeply wrinkled on the surface
like a toad with a ruff

his blunted tip rises into the sun
with white gunk between the buds
a fully bearded urethra
lips cracked, the stamens burgeon

In this poem, an evident anthropomorphizing rewrites the cactus into a pathetic being. Its sociopolitical identity is generated by false theories of supremacy, and the physical reality of the anthropomorphized plant is presented as “deeply wrinkled.” This decay did not happen due to time, as the poetic voice describes a scene of teleological birth, despite its supposed majesty, by its nature as a being born to reproduce, and the subsequent destruction of its environment, as evidenced in the poem’s final verses when the poetic voice explains that “the stamens burgeon.”

Skinner’s work, therefore, disproves the human contribution, revealing it to be a mere influx of negative interventions, while highlighting the notion of the natural pantheon as a complex web of relationships better described as transnational. Among the verses that support this transferential conceit, the following words from the poem “Second,” the poem which opens the collection, may be found: “[...] infinite scale, neither down nor up, the same / heard even as silence, made tangible / as a dormouse or a rock, a tick / conceivable but not by any vertebrate ...” (SKINNER, 2005, p. 3). A harmony exists, represented by an imperceptible, yet tangible, sound, in solid, living form (the rock is included as a living being in Skinner’s natural universe), a level of communication and communing between non-human entities.

On the macro-thematic level, in a 2012 collection, *Writing the Dark Side of Travel*, Skinner explains that his fascination with the destructive consequences of Modernity, and perhaps even humanity’s mere presence

on the planet, has been commodified by the fixation with places and celebrated suffering, such as museums dedicated to the Holocaust:

Museums such as the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, involve survivors in their activities to personalize and dramatize the tourist's visit experience. The living connection with the past literally brings home the horror and lends authenticity to the uneasy representation of the Holocaust [...] reactions to Auschwitz and the Museum of Tolerance show how difficult it is to foster a balanced and respectful but disturbing representation of a darkness without causing offence or failing to elicit the appropriate response from the visitor. (SKINNER, 2012, p. 8-9).

In this sense, on the question of the world's legibility of the part of humanity, interstitial and essential relationships whose core is viewed through the "[...] relationship between cultural representation and touristic memorialization" (CARRIGAN, 2014, p. 243-244) exist. In the rewriting of historical memory as a form of extreme knowledge, the making into object of an individual's experience with the unknown opens to the door to a phenomenology of the human object:

[O] princípio de alteridade, tal como a identificação, e diz sobre as maneiras pelas quais o Ego converte o mundo exterior (a sociedade e a tecnologia, no caso do estudo) em percepção própria – a partir da qual se naturalizam certos dualismos (semelhante/dessemelhante ou igual/desigual, por exemplo). Em suma, identificando-se com tal realidade, ou não, todos os elementos constituintes da mesma são internalizados pela 'célula individual'. Daí termos afirmado anteriormente que o corpo é tanto imagem exterior quanto interior de seu 'entorno'. (FERREIRA; MACHADO; CAMINHA, 2016, p. 487).

If we are to apply this notion to Skinner's poetry, and in particular, to the thematic developed in the poems presented previously, in a wider, teleological sense one reaches the conclusion that Skinner's poetry, in its own epistemological and ecocritical path, contests the imposition of brute, human force on the natural environment by way of the abjection of the human being, turning it into a mere antagonist symbol of our planet's flora and fauna's own transnationalism, this state being an amalgamation of the universal opposition of creation/destruction.

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**A ecocrítica norte-americana de século XXI:
a contestação à condição pós-humana em
Political Cactus Poems de Jonathan Skinner**

Resumo

No contexto poético norte-americano, o intercâmbio da reconhecida ontologia com base no conceito da natureza como universo extra-humano e a sua concomitante epistemologia na poética realça-se como contraste aos devastadores resultados do capitalismo atual. Além disso, o lugar da ecocrítica na comunidade de poetas dos Estados Unidos oferece uma possibilidade de gerir uma nova conceição do transnacionalismo. Nasce uma metalinguagem desconstrutiva e anti-hegemónica na poesia ecocrítica como expressão de um possível paradigma cuja finalidade é de servir como vanguarda de confronto à corrente sociopolítica da maioria. Um exemplo pouco estudado e reconhecido no âmbito da língua portuguesa, mas cuja presença vem a calhar num momento propício para a expansão dos estudos da literatura ecocrítica a um patamar transnacional e global, é o poeta norte-americano Jonathan Skinner. A sua primeira coleção de poemas, *Political Cactus Poems* (2005), revela uma novidosa epistemologia extra-humana na qual a natureza recobra a sua primacia por meio da expressão duma ética natural.

Palavras Chaves: ecocrítica, Jonathan Skinner, poesia americana.

Robert Simon serves as Professor of Spanish and Portuguese in the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Kennesaw State University. Included among his published works are: *From Post-Mortem to Post-Mystic: Blanca Andreu, Galicia, and the New Iberian Mysticism* (2019), *To A Nação, with Love: The Politics of Language through Angolan Poetry* (2017), *The Modern, the Postmodern, and the Fact of Transition: The Paradigm Shift through Peninsular Literatures* (2011), and *Understanding the Portuguese Poet Joaquim Pessoa, 1942-2007: A Study in Iberian Cultural Hybridity* (2008), besides a variety of articles and other studies that analyze Transnationalism and Mysticism in the contemporary poetry of Angola, Portugal, and Spain. He is also the author of ten collections of poetry and was nominated in 2022 for the Georgia Author of the Year Award for his most recent poetic work, *Ode to Friendship* (2021). He is also an active musician who plays the oboe and English horn.