

## ECOPOETIC APPROACHES: BRENDA HILLMAN AND RYOICHI WAGO

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*Abstract: This article focuses on readings of *Pebbles of Poetry* (2011) and *QQQ* (2018) by Ryoichi Wago, a contemporary Japanese free verse poet who lives in Fukushima, the site of Japan's most catastrophic environmental disaster in 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake and three collections of Brenda Hillman, a contemporary American poet, and a social activist, *Cascadia* (2001), *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* (2013), and *Extra Hidden Life, among the Days* (2018), to explore how their poems model comparative ambient interrelations between humans and their environment, ecopoetic approach. They commonly share a postmodern free verse style, radical punctuation, and radical use of spaces; this approach is based on organically composing languages and syntax, contributing to developing an organic form for poetic languages. They have a clear sense of place, California for Hillman and Fukushima for Wago, which causes both interests and an intimate relationship with the nonhuman, the environment.*

### I. Ecopoetics

As of 2021, it has been ten years since the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station meltdown. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster caused the most severe radiation damage since the Chernobyl accident. Meanwhile, in 2020, during the COVID-19 outbreak, the Black Lives Matter movement in the US came to prominence. Black Lives Matter protests took place across the country, addressing a wide range of cultural and social issues, particularly racism, that the US has been struggling with for a long time.

Environmental literature, including a reflection on the relationship between literature and the environment, has been made in response to increasing interest in environmental problems in the UK and the US. Subsequently, environmental criticism has developed from the literature, incorporating ecological thought and showing active involvement in environmental crises. Its analysis has targeted both novels and non-fiction.

Regarding the study of environmental literature, Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, establishes a new basis for reading American nature writing, with Thoreau's *Walden* as a touchstone. This work constructs an environmental perception and discusses the consequences for literary scholarship attempting to imagine a more "ecocentric" way of being. In Buell's subsequent *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*, he advocates "toxic discourse" and discusses how Rachel Carson's writing in *Silent Spring* can be seen as "the discourse of ecological apocalypse." Based on Buell's accomplishment, an "irresponsible method" for ecocriticism has been constructed.

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Regarding the development of the notion of ecopoetry since the 1990s, Jonathan Bate was the first to note in *Song of the Earth*, based on his study of Wordsworth, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, “Ecopoetry is not synonymous with writing that is pragmatically green: a manifesto for ecological correctness will not be poetic because its language is bound to be instrumental, to address questions of doing rather than to ‘present’ the experience of dwelling” (Bate, 2000, 42). In the US, until around 2010, the study of ecopoetry and ecopoetics has only been incorporated into orthodox poetic studies; ecopoetry and ecopoetics have not been discussed at all. However, 2013 was an essential year for ecopoetics because of the launch of *The Ecopoetry Anthology* and the first Conference on Ecopoetics, which was held at the University of California Berkeley in February of that year. Poets, scholars, artists, activists, and educators gathered to discuss a poetic ecological perspective. They demonstrated that “ecopoetics can encompass experiments in community making, ranging from poetry and visual art, literary criticism, and performance to walking, foraging, farming, cooking, and being alongside each other, whether human or other than human, in space and place” (Hume and Osborne, 2018, 2). Angus Fletcher’s discussion of Emily Dickinson’s “From Cocoon forth a Butterfly” is representative of the focus on poetic perception. He writes, “so much is happening, the butterfly sets or surveys a scene in which a surrounding ambience of things and forces impinges upon a ghostly imagined perceiver, an observer, or even more abstractly, someone floating in space” (2004, 118). Fletcher’s “surrounding ambience of things” implies a sense of space in which things, humans, and nonhumans are surrounded, rather than a sense of place.

Similarly, in *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton states, “The rhetoric of nature depends upon something I define as an Ambient poetics, a way of conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world” (2007, 22). Kate Rigby has suggested that ecopoetics might be defined as “the incorporation of an ecological or environmental perspective into the study of poetics” (2006, 79). Brenda Hillman suggests that “a term like ‘ecopoetics’ is not meant to narrow but to open the conversation about poetry’s relationship to the environments” (Hillman). Since the 2010s, more articles on ecopoetry and ecopoetics have appeared in the academic literature, “with critics starting to make connections between ecopoetics and debates within gender and sexuality, critical race, and disability studies, among others” (Hume and Osborne, 2018, 3). That recent ecopoetry and ecopoetics have focused on poetic perception and poetic language.

By constructing the definition of ecopoetry and ecopoetics, ecopoetics share biocentric, a sense of place, and ecomimesis (writing nature, nature writing) with ecocriticism enable exploration by its own, such as empathy to humans and things, representation of interrelation, its poetic language, how poetic languages are formed organically, the response to the Anthropocene, and climate change and influence with poetic language, form, syntax, and grammar.

This article focuses on readings of *Pebbles of Poetry* (2011) and *QQQ* (2018) by Japanese poet Ryoichi Wago and the “Tree” collections of Brenda Hillman, *Cascadia* (2001), *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* (2013), *Extra Hidden Life, among the Days* (2018), to explore how their poems model comparative ambient interrelations between humans and their environment.

## II. Brenda Hillman

This section explores Hillman's eco-poetics and activism through three of her collections.

*Californians aren't good at merging*

Ellis Motel	Little mirrors in his spine
	Cascadia didn't merge it floated
Tulelake	Why did the chicken cross the ocean
	Get someone to help you do it
	A poem touches its margins gently (Hillman, 2001, 59)

Among Hillman's collections, *Practical Water* focuses on water, *Pieces of Air in the Epic* focuses on air, and *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* focuses on fire. The focus of these three collections strongly affects the residents of California. In *Cascadia*, Hillman's geological interests overlap with the way the poems are formed; as Hillman mentions, "In writing *Cascadia*, there was the notion of geology as mind, mind as geology." *Cascadia*, which is a word for the ancient landform that preceded present-day California, was established as a bioregion in 1851, comprising Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia in addition to California. The historical process of how *Cascadia* merged these lands is shown. However, the next scene jumps into "chickens crossing the ocean." The juxtaposed images remain fragmented. At the same time, while the right-hand column shows fragmented implications, the left-hand column describes environmental degradation with the faint words "Ellis Motel and Tulelake," which are not only a symbol of human work and artificiality but also the Tule Lake National Monument. The poem narrates the land's experiences and emotions through the history of *Cascadia* in California in a fragmented way, through images such as land desolation and chickens crossing the ocean, but also notes that a poem touches "its margins gently," i.e., the boundary between humans, nature, and artifice. How then does Hillman suggest depicting environmental degradation? Hillman mentions the following:

Can poetry address environmental degradation using any formal technique? Is the "fragmentary" writing more suitable for eco-poetics? The same question was asked about feminist experimental poetry in the early 90s—is the use of partial or disjunctive techniques more suitable to women writing about their discontinuous days, poets asked? As I began to write "like this," I encountered mostly a male tradition in the kinds of environmental writing that were out there. *Cascadia* came from an impulse to record process-oriented emotional states, the half-finished, the notational, the ragged, the syntactically scrambled that made up psychological and emotional experience in the geologic features. (Ecopoetry, 96)

Hillman advocates using "fragmentary" writing to address environmental degradation and avers that "fragmentary" writing originates from feminist experimental poetry in the early 1990s. Her "impulse to record process-oriented emotional states, the half-finished, the notational, the ragged, the syntactically scrambled that made up the psychological and emotional experience" is defined

in opposition to a current male tradition that includes consistent, rational states, which are perfectly finished, refined, not notational, and syntactically formatted; they demonstrate the qualities that make up rational experiences. Through these techniques, Hillman experiments with both fragmentary techniques and environmental degradation. The following quotation is from “Extra Hidden Life, among the Days.”

Sometimes , when i'm  
 very tired , i think  
 of extremophiles , chemolithoautotrophs  
 & others with power for changing  
 not-life into lives , of those that eat rock  
 & fire in volcanos , before the death  
 of the world but after the death of a human (Hillman, 2018, 22)

In “Extra Hidden Life, among the Days,” the speaker reveals a curiosity for the repetition of “power for changing / not-life into lives” and their energy despite wildfire damage and volcanoes. She explored postmodern poetic modes, such as fragmentation and radical punctuation. Every line is interrupted by empty spaces and commas; lines are broken in the middle of the sentence. Here, an uncapitalized “i” is used instead of capitalized “I.” In feminist discourse, the uncapitalized “i” has been used in historically critical distinction from the male tradition of “I.” Hillman refers to it in an interview as “a more stretchy sense of ‘I’”; she uses “i” not only as part of feminist discourse but in its non-egocentric sense, which resonates with Forrest Gander’s statement, “‘I’ must be a continuity, ‘I’ is multiple and the self is interconnected with other things and beings” (Gander and Kinsella 2012, 1117). Regarding punctuation, each sentence is broken into three phrases with empty spaces in the middle, which helps to give a sense of fragmentation. Hillman breaks syntactical rules through radical punctuation, using long and intentionally incorrect spaces based on a process-oriented technique. The radical punctuation also offers an embodiment that evokes two contrasting algae growing on the earth. It reveals an interest in very small bacteria and mophiles. Hillman intentionally writes in this way, as she describes in the following:

Lichens resemble similes and metaphors, because they are about two or more things coming together, fungus and algae, and it turns out there are also other elements too—perhaps yeasts—that enable the symbiosis. In simile and metaphor, things come together. And in lichen it is a layer of algae and a layer of fungus, sandwiched on to each other. There is no root system. It is a good figure for metaphor, the way it works. (Fiedorczuk, n.d. 14)

The formation of lichens has an affinity with similes and metaphors for Hillman; building similes and metaphors have the same energetic elements as the formation of lichens. It is “evocative interrelationships between them.” “in ways that seem process-oriented, but never formless.” Hillman treats metaphors and similes, as well as lichens, as examples of organic interrelation and materialism. Then how do her poetic languages involve emotion? The following quotation from “Autumn Ritual with Hate Turned Sideways” shows another experimental technique:

—i pull the hate  
 on a rope ladder to the resting zone . . .  
     H  
       H  
        H  
 pull the A on down  
 A  
   A  
    A  
    Put that sick A to bed. Get well, A Pinched  
 fire. Bring the T down now  
           T  
           T  
           T (Hillman, 2013, 39)

Hillman thinks to put into words metaphysically before having “hate” feelings. There is a curious link between her words and her concept because she is particularly interested in what ideas can do and how languages can work, depending on her ideas. In this poem, the speaker hesitates to turn to hate—instead, the speaker firstly “pulls” “H,” and secondly “pulls” “A” down. The speaker has a playful mind to “[p]ut that sick A to bed.” There is a relationship between “A” and fire. Again, “T” is brought down, and “E” is finally laid horizontally. Seemingly, the poem is a wordplay, but the idea behind it and the language in which it is expressed compete on the page.

      E E E  
       Put the E to bed. Get well, E.  
 Weird shapes around campfires  
     below the mind.  
 tiny fires with hurt earth spirits  
     as in Aeschylus. Resting letters now  
     so they can live— (Hillman, 2013, 39)

“Autumn Ritual with Hate Turned Sideways” is included in *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire*, which focuses on associations with words, “fire,” “fuel,” “burn,” “heat,” and “flame.” Here are “campfires” and “tiny fires;” “tiny fires with hurt earth spirits” are associated with the elegy of Aeschylus. The metaphor of “fire” corresponds to the “hurt earth spirit,” which is the emotion of “sorrow.” Thus, her vision corresponds to the quotation from Blakes’s “Zoas,” “Metaphors for emotion about the matter and the nonhuman world; Relationships to words and phrases” (Hillman, 2013, 98). “Autumn Ritual with Hate Turned Sideways” consists of a central metaphor, “hate,” which is broken into pieces, i.e., four letters. Each letter has an emotion connecting the material and nonhuman worlds. Hillman has also explored the relationship between letters and phrases. Hillman’s ecopoetry includes her language poetry, experimental and avant-garde poetics since the 1970s, and her activism. “Crypto-Animist Introvert Activism” is from *Extra Hidden Life among the Days*. It is a poem for protests.

Every week for about a decade some of us at school have been standing At lunch hour to protest drones, racism, state killing, the death of pieces & so on.

We stand under a live oak while people walk by on their way to Lunch. We hold up the signs. It's an absurd situation & it changes nothing.

The protest is absurd but i Admire these forms of absurdity. When the revolution comes, the police White mothers in the Moraga Safeway will still be shopping for sugary ce-Reals & barbecue sauce. When the time comes, some will rise & some will Dance & some will lay our bodies down. (Hillman, 2018, 43)

According to an interview I conducted with Hillman, this poem has the following role:

“Crypto-animist” is a word i made up during my anti-war activism starting in about 2004; i realized that i did not want to be engaged in a “political poetry” way that did not include the spirit world or the feeling that there is an animating force even when we are doing political actions. So that particular poem is engaged with the spirits of dead ancestors and the voices of rocks and so on. Sometimes when i've been involved in street actions or protests i just think of the non-human species— lichens or mosses or bacteria— that are present but not making their voices heard as loudly.

It is from her original animism through the circle of nonhumans, fungi, and algae.

As the photos show, the speaker and other protesters raise boards with slogans including “Wage Peace,” “NONVIOLENCE FIRST,” and “BLACK LIVES MATTER.” The social and environmental justice movements are based on Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience. The speaker is the second person in free verse with no lines; it is a very narrative poem, with photos inserted. Hillman states,

The little “thumbnail” photos are a way of signaling that this is poetry of a present moment and also it gives a little mixed media quality, not new to poetry at all but definitely not common. Lots of folks have asked why the pictures are so small. i don't want them to dominate, and the fact that they are supposed to be a part of the spontaneous reportorial quality of the poems makes high quality images rather optional!

Hillman is involved in various demonstrations, including Occupy Cal (Berkeley), where Hillman and her husband Robert Hass suffered assaults by riot police. As Hillman mentions, “Poetry is very important to do and to engage in, especially when trusted officials are misusing—.” Furthermore, she states:

Poets can also be activists; we can work both with our words and with other forms of direct action. It has been very instructive and energizing to go to Sacramento or D.C. to work with courageous activists who aren't writers themselves but who, by the way, very much need poetry and art for their work. We can still speak powerfully and sway people with poetry.

Such social action poems include “A Brutal Encounter Recollected in Tranquility” and “Experiments with Poetry Are Taken Outdoors” in *Seasonal*

*Works with Letters on Fire*. Hillman's introduction, "A Brutal Encounter Recollected in Tranquility," is spoken the riot as "an essay from November 9th."

In this poem, Hillman was standing in front of police during the riot, but she knew "the point is lost." The speaker thinks of Euclidean geometry to move forward as a peaceful protest, but a student resist and is beaten. Students were beaten, and the speaker could not stop it. The speaker calls the police to come back to their family and says, "Your writing offers recovery from nonexistence & no cure for depression is action." The speaker ends the sentence with, "The arts reach other ants the edge of the lawn; they pass the message along." Through "A Brutal Encounter Recollected in Tranquility," Hillman states how a poet engages with social injustice. Hillman's role is based on her statement,

Poetry makes relationships between a larger society, the public and the individual much more conscious by addressing matters of the heart, the invisible world, the nature that we have in us and outside of us, by making language about impossible states of feeling or about social matters.

This statement also applies to her attitude about ecopoetics: "a term like 'ecopoetics' is not meant to narrow but to open the conversation about poetry relationship to the environment." Her view of the poet's mission, based on Stevens, is as follows:

Stevens wrote, "Part of Nature Part of Us" The mission of the poet—to bring the form of the mind in relation to the world—the value of the imagination, of uncertainty, of using powerful compressed language—these are good tools for addressing the current environmental crises. Poets & scholars can create imaginative spaces for perception, acknowledging the unknown with science & the dream, recognizing the ever-changing nature of knowledge & language, & bringing radical activist & spiritual practices to bear. Everything is everything. The appropriate responses to the present circumstances are awe & revolt (Hillman, 2017, 97-8).

For Hillman, poetry is an art form that builds a relationship with the environment through her imagination and perceptual languages. In almost the same period (June 2012), two hundred thousand people were demonstrating in front of Congress in Tokyo in opposition to restarting the Ōi nuclear power station. Four days after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, Ryoichi Wago (1968–) had used Twitter to begin writing a short poem, which he continued writing in the middle of the demonstration against restarting the Ōi nuclear power station in June 2012.

### III. Ryoichi Wago

Ryoichi Wago is a contemporary Japanese free verse poet who lives in Fukushima, Japan's most catastrophic environmental disaster in 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake, known as the 3.11 earthquake. Wago grew up in Fukushima and studied education and literature at Fukushima University. He was the last student of Masahiro Sawa (1946–), a widely celebrated Japanese modern and

contemporary literature scholar. Wago studied the writings of Junzaburo Nishiwaki and chose Sakutaro Hagiwara as the focus of his graduation thesis. As an undergraduate, Wago began to write poetry and was a school drama club member. He would photocopy his poems to hand them out to passersby at the train station.

After graduation, Wago became a high school teacher and continued to write poetry. He had published his first book, *AFTER* (1998), by the time he was thirty. It is a study of experimental surrealism. After his firsthand experience of the 3.11 earthquake and tsunami, he experienced what he described as “the surrealistic in real life.” Before this, his writing process took him from a concrete real world into a surrealist space. Now, he was surrounded by this surrealism and was at a total loss for words. In the isolation of his apartment, trying to reduce his exposure to the radiation that surrounded him, he took to Twitter to communicate with the outside world. *Shi no Tsubute*, or *Pebbles of Poetry*, is an anthology compiled from his Twitter feed between March 16 and May 25, 2011. *Pebbles of Poetry* was translated into French as *Jets de poems: Dans le vif de Fukushima* by Corinne Atlan. French readers embraced this book as a poetic witness of an environmental catastrophe that affected the entire world. It won the 2017 Poetry Prize awarded in France by the Literary Journal *NUNC* (*Le prix de poesie de la revue NUNC*). *Pebbles of Poetry* begins as follows:

I came across a big catastrophe. I was staying at an evacuation site, but have kept safe and have returned to my house to work. Thank you for worrying about me and encouraging me, everyone. March 16<sup>th</sup>, 4:23 a.m. 2011.

Today, six days have passed after the earthquake. My way of thinking has completely changed. March 16, 4:29 a.m., 2011.

Finally, I cried and cried. I made up my mind to work on the carnage. March 16, 4:29 a.m., 2011.

The radiation is falling. It is a quiet night. March 16, 4:29 a.m., 2011.

What does the meaning of this catastrophe hurt so much?

All the meaning in the phenomenal world, it might occur after the affair. If so, what is the meaning of “after the affair” itself? Are there any meanings there?

What does this catastrophe want to teach us? Unless there is something to teach us, what should I believe any more?

The radiation is falling. It is a quiet night. (Wago, 2011, 10)

On March 16, 2011, Wago began posting updates on his Twitter feed every two or three minutes. These posts were mostly about the aftershocks that occurred and the way the city of Fukushima was changing from moment to moment. On March 20, he noticed that he had had reached 2263 followers (Wago, 2011, 65).

Dread. Dread of rain. Where does rain come and where does it go?  
Dread of rain. In the rain, the abandoned are lining up behind the abandoned. March 27<sup>th</sup>, 22:34 p.m. 2011. (Wago, 2011, 139)

The day he wrote this tweet, Wago went to a gas station. While he waited for his turn, he saw people getting gas and considered that they might be leaving the area.



He imagined the cars being abandoned and the more significant connotations of abandoned streets, houses, parks, and businesses. Many people living in Fukushima had, in fact, left the area, and the city's population was getting sparser day by day. He used the term "abandoned," translated here from the Japanese *mujin*—literally, *no people*—in similar contexts several times in his tweets. Since then, "abandoned" has become a significant theme in Wago's poetry, culminating in a long poem titled "Abandoned Thoughts." The metaphor of "mujin" represents no people, both human-made disasters and human-centered attitudes. These "abandoned thoughts" speak to a physical and emotional void. However, the speaker maintains a sense of hope in lines like "no morning no dawn."

Sometimes Wago addresses each of his Twitter followers individually, telling a story using "you" and "I." His tweets are more like a series of private letters to an unspecified "you." Forrest Gander discusses how eco-poetics have taken on a wide range of connotations and function as a variable set of technical and conceptual strategies for writing during an ecological crisis (Gander and Kinsella, 2012, 11). Similar to the quotation of Hillman's poem, Gander mentions five points, including the dispersal of ego-centered agency and a reorientation of objectivity toward intersubjectivity (Gander and Kinsella, 2012, 11). In Wago's writing, the first-person singular is used or implied frequently to explore self and otherness. This syntactical approach disperses the subject, reflecting and expressing ecological crisis. After the disaster, Wago realized that he could witness what was happening each day in Fukushima City in an accessible language. For him, poetry became both a tool for communication and a means of transcending the limits of words.

His latest book, *QQQ*, won the Sakutaro Hagiwara prize, one of Japan's most prestigious awards for contemporary free verse poetry. In *QQQ*, the speaker speaks to things and people left behind and abandoned in Fukushima through dialogue and interconnectedness and their interrelations and metamorphoses. *QQQ* begins with "Becoming a Bug." The speaker becomes a bug and is transferred to an abandoned school. He goes to "a big jail" located in a very lonely place. An abandoned landscape without cars or people is shown, including "The fall of houses which was fallen asleep," "the void of red traffic lights with turning on," and "a dog without its head," all of which creates "a huge amount of living hell." The speaker looks at the shadow and is back to the city as devoted by the darkness."

In the "Empty Room," a few towns become empty rooms as they are even if we wait for the following residents. There is a room with windows which have been closed for a long time. The speaker talks to an empty, abandoned room. In "Twelve Bottles," a husband and wife who have lived in a temporary apartment during the evacuation return to their own house. They must return to their apartment to get drinking water and decide on the number of bottles they will fill, up to 12. The speaker asks them the meaning of the number of bottles. However, their answers are uninformative, and the mystery remains unsolved.

Returning to my house that time  
 on the ceiling  
 My wife, son and I were walking  
 also three bears live together (Wago, 2018, 97)

In “Family,” “My wife, son and I” are depicted as the abandoned and appear like ghosts; it is surprising that they even live together. A void-house, abandoned animals, and ghosts appear in an abandoned Fukushima. These materials reflect the sense of the interrelationship between coons, mice, and bears that build a strangely unharmonious oneness.

On Month Day 2016, the following headline and summary text appeared in *The Guardian*: “The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists Declare Dawn of Human-Influenced Age: Experts say human impact on Earth so profound that Holocene must give way to epoch defined by nuclear tests, plastic pollution and domesticated chicken” (Carrington). Humanity’s impact on the Earth had become so profound that a new geological epoch, “the Anthropocene,” had to be officially declared. Masafumi Shinohara writes that “what is most discussed is how we understand the reality that human beings do not live independently but live interrelatedly with other nonhumans living on the Earth” (Shinohara 2018, 16, as translated by the author). In *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Timothy Clark argues, “[T]he ‘hyper object’ aspect of the Anthropocene finds a subtler response in poems that dramatize or engage a sense of disproportion or discordance in our basic perception of things” (2019, 71).

The relationship between humans and nonhumans highlighted by the naming of the Anthropocene is also an issue in ecopoetry’s use of ecomimesis. Shinohara asks, “How should we look at the materialism of human existence in the realm of the nonhuman?” (2018, 17). As defined earlier, Shinohara’s argument is again based on Timothy Morton’s conception of ecomimesis. Further, Morton writes, “Ecomimesis involves a poetics of ambiance. Ambiance denotes the sense of a circumambient or surrounding world. It suggests something material and physical, though somewhat intangible” (2007, 33). Morton suggests that rather than conceiving an organic world surrounded by humans, ecomimesis attempts to constitute a new sense of how thought and principles relate to material objects. Morton’s perspective shows how we act with nonhumans and the surrounding world in the Anthropocene. Shinohara writes, “According to Morton, our interrelation with objects should be based on objective actions. We should restart our thinking from the perspective of objects” (2018, 168).

Wago’s current poems also investigate the relationship between humans and the nonhuman. The following is from “QQQ”:

starving cow, do you walk slowly?  
 starving cow, do you walk with your feet firmly on the ground?  
 starving cow, do you walk over ordinary grass?  
 first with the right foot, then with the right foot, then with the right?  
 is there something you want to know? (Wago, 2018, 118) (translated by  
 Halebsky and Takahashi)

The poem “QQQ” is composed entirely of lines that are posed as questions. This continuous questioning implies abnormal conditions and creates a skeptical frame where the poem can reveal social justice and environmental issues. The speaker directs these questions to a “starving cow” who was abandoned after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. The cow is malnourished, strolling aimlessly, and deformed by exposure to elevated radiation levels. Because it cannot walk normally, staggers around, stumbling from one unsteady hoof stride to the next.

In his sketches of abandoned animals left behind in Fukushima, Wago builds a sense of animals behaving in extraordinary ways. It can also be seen in another poem in the same collection, *QQQ*, entitled “Ghosts.” In traditional Japanese Noh theater, ghosts frequently appear as spirits of the dead, showing a lingering attachment to the living. Through a conversation with a traveling priest, they often speak of their misfortunes and their unresolved feelings of anger or sorrow. In Noh plays, these ghosts are the spirits of humans who are trapped on earth due to their lingering attachments. However, in Wago’s poem, which alludes to Basho’s haiku, these ghosts are nonhuman, including dead mosquitoes, dead tractors, dead bulldozers, and dead shovels. In this way, the poem develops interrelationships among the speaker, the animals, the insects, and the construction site tools used in the decontamination efforts in Fukushima.

The ghosts of mosquitos  
 are wandering over withered fields  
 looking for our salty skin  
 , flying around my ear  
 I cannot see their shape at all and we  
 , have no idea where to scratch  
 .  
 .....

a shovel left on the small of my back,  
 what should I do with it?  
 , the tracks left by  
 bulldozers ,  
 land fill,  
 , to dump a hole within a hole  
 ,  
 My skin, ,  
 even today,  
 scrapped,  
 gathered,  
 dug,  
 , into a hole, ,  
 filled in here ,  
 as the ghosts of a billion mosquitos pass over me,  
 somewhere, I’m itchy ,  
 ragged top soil  
 the only thing we can do today is dig, bury the soil  
 hole by hole  
 there’s no other choice  
 without fail, the sun rises and even within the hole, it’s morning  
 in this hole lightning strikes  
 in the field footprints without a body  
 keep going  
 dead trees are standing their bark stripped bare  
 (Wago, 2018, 38–40) (translated by Halebsky and Takahashi)

In the poem “Ghosts,” the speaker is the Earth. Various ghosts of both nonhumans and objects appear in the poem. From the Earth and the soil perspective, the poem describes a method used to lower the radiation levels in the areas surrounding the Fukushima Daiichi power plant. It involves digging up the topsoil, packing it into large plastic bags, and burying it deeper underground. In the poem, the Earth is a living being, and digging up the soil is described as scratching the skin. Through the voice of the Earth, disparate things such as mosquitoes and plastic bags are linked, and new associations are created. The topsoil becomes the skin. The ghosts of mosquitoes fly around and stick to the skin of the Earth. It fits well with Clark’s understanding of ecopoetic texts, in which “[a] proliferation of surplus and supplementary meanings and hidden associations now evoke or link to disparate things” (2019, 69). The radical punctuation also evokes the sense that while the mosquitoes are flying around, tractors and bulldozers are lining, moving, and scratching the ground in the construction sites.

Wago was asked how the catastrophe had changed his writing in a recent interview. Wago answered that “after the disaster, my language sense came to overlap with my physical sense” (2012, 97). This “overlap” between language and physical experience comes through in the poems as intimate connections among contradictory things, including living creatures, human-made machines, and organic elements. There is an unusual sensual relationship among mosquitoes, bulldozers, and holes dug in the ground. This poem and others show the harm of a human-centered view of the world. “Ghosts,” like much of Wago’s work, seeks to reveal the anthropocentrism of nuclear power and many other structures of industrial society, such as materialism. Wago explains his “poetics of catastrophe” as encompassing gradations of rage and grief, a deep sense of place, consolation for the spirits, environmental justice, and hope. He says, “one of the purposes for me is to look for how I can communicate through poetry.” Wago employs language to keep the memories of Fukushima—the place, the soil, the animals, the air, the water, and the people—alive.

While there is a long tradition of attention to nature in Japanese poetry, ecocritical concerns are still emerging. Wago gives voice to an urgent call for immediate action, a mourning for the destruction of all kinds of life by the 3.11 catastrophe, and a keen awareness that this disaster was human-made. While the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown maimed the Tohoku region, Wago’s poems show us that the cause of this destruction is not unique and that many other places on Earth are at risk of experiencing similar devastation. Through the work of Wago and others, this ecopoetic perspective is growing within Japanese literature.

#### IV. Conclusion

From the perspective of ecopoetics, there are some common elements between Brenda Hillman and Ryoichi Wago. First, they are both involved in environmental justice as teachers, poets, and activists. In addition to these broad environmental issues, Hillman focuses on climate change, gun violence, and environmental injustice and inequality. In contrast, Wago focuses on radioactive pollution and the contempt for animal rights that resulted from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster. Hillman is involved in various protests alongside other activists. Although Wago did not directly participate in the demonstration in front of

Congress, he continued writing his poems in opposition to restarting the nuclear power station on Twitter and hosted a praying ceremony titled *Miyrai Kagura* and his poems' choir activity. Second, they share a postmodern free verse style, radical punctuation, and radical use of spaces. This approach is based on organically composing languages and syntax, contributing to developing an organic form for poetic languages. Third, they have a clear sense of place, California for Hillman and Fukushima for Wago. Fourth, they both have interests in, and an intimate relationship with, the nonhuman. It implies 21st-century materialism, as well as a response to the Anthropocene.

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