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Title	Seasonal Disturbances: An Interview with Poet Karen McCarthy Woolf
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/36737/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa052
Date	2020
Citation	Reddick, Yvonne (2020) Seasonal Disturbances: An Interview with Poet Karen McCarthy Woolf. ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment. ISSN 1076-0962
Creators	Reddick, Yvonne

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa052>

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Seasonal Disturbances: An Interview With Poet Karen McCarthy Woolf

Karen McCarthy Woolf is a poet, editor and ecopoetry scholar, based in London. Her first book, *An Aviary of Small Birds* (Carcanet 2014), was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis and Fenton Aldeburgh prizes, and was a book of the month in *The Guardian* newspaper. Her second book, *Seasonal Disturbances* (Carcanet 2017) is informed by environmental issues; it was a Poetry Book Society Commendation and a Poetry School Book of the Year for 2017. Her PhD research is on hybridity and the sacred, in the poetry of Joy Harjo, Louise Gluck and Kei Miller, funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Council scholarship at Royal Holloway University. The recipient of an Arts Council England award and the Kate Betts Memorial Prize, Karen McCarthy Woolf is a fellow of the Complete Works literary talent development scheme, which aims to create more diversity in UK publishing. She edited the Complete Works anthology *Ten: The New Wave* (Bloodaxe, 2014).

In this interview, she discusses the arts and the idea of the Anthropocene, the formal strategies she uses in her poetry, and the intersection of her ecocritical research with her poetic practice.

Yvonne Reddick: Could you tell me how you came to write your second collection, *Seasonal Disturbances*?

Karen McCarthy Woolf: My first book, *An Aviary of Small Birds*, was a book of elegies for a baby son who died in childbirth, and I was also exploring a lot of other bereavements in that. So, there is a lot of trauma and grief within it. Writing about a stillbirth and the loss of a baby is a very intimate type of grief, and it's an odd thing, because it's a strangely public thing when you're nine months pregnant: everybody can see. So, the bereavement becomes very public, but it's a deeply intimate and private thing. That made me think about the interactions between grief as a public thing and a private thing. I was also thinking very much about loss, and about clinging onto things that seemed certain. Because I felt like I'd lost everything, I was clinging onto trees, the sea, the landscape and skyline. Nature was really important, even though I grew up in London. And then, ironically, I realised this is absolutely not certain: it's more uncertain than it's ever been – it's completely precarious. So I started to think about these really big losses that we are sustaining: that humanity is sustaining, and inflicting upon the planet at the same time. So, the impetus was shifting from making a very intimate loss as universal as I could, to making something universal as intimate as I could. That was the overall thing I wanted to do, and that was the beginning of it – but I had always been interested in environmentalism and ecology. I've always felt that all politics are important, but at the same time, if we don't have a planet on which they take place, they'll be irrelevant! I was always very minded towards ecological issues from when I was very young.

YR. Your collection strikes me as an important book for thinking about the Anthropocene – is it a concept that has informed your work?

KMW: Definitely, because one of my interests, both academically and creatively, has been the idea that we aren't the only living beings on this planet. If you think about the levels of narcissism in society at the moment, and if you then think about that narcissistic gaze and how, in a way, it's a symptom or a product of this much more deeply-embedded paradigm of anthropocentric thinking, and so in *Seasonal Disturbances* I'm thinking about how to expose some of those systems. There's a sequence of found sonnets from a book called *The Science of Life*, which was co-authored by H. G. Wells and Julian Huxley, who was Aldous Huxley's brother, and was a zoologist. It's interesting because it was written in 1929, and in some ways

it's ecologically very forward-thinking – but at the same time there's this really dodgy eugenics science, because people were obsessed with overpopulation: As we know, it's not really about how many humans there are, it's what the humans that are here do: how they think and connect to every other living being on the planet. If you think of indigenous cultures – Native American cultures – and their cultural and spiritual belief-systems, quite broadly, one commonality is a core of animist thought: this idea that we are interconnected beings – a social belief system that corresponds to the science of Gaia theory. And I think that whether this plays out via materialist ecopoetics – I'm interested in spiritually alert ecopoetics – what's important is that the human being starts to realise itself as one of myriad manifestations of animated matter. It's quite powerful and it's quite frightening to think of the Anthropocene in this way – almost like scar tissue, that this is occurring. The speed at which these changes are happening is accelerating. And we do get to these points of the unknown. That in itself is one of the most fascinating things about it.

YR: Your PhD research was on ecopoetry and hybridity. Could you tell me about the coupling, a form that you have invented, and how it relates to hybridity?

KMW: I am of mixed cultural heritage: my father was Jamaican and my mum is English. I've written about that throughout my career, but what I've realised is that in fact, where that sense of cultural hybridity in me plays out, is actually formally. I've always been very interested in this mixing and juxtaposition of two seemingly mismatched or very different things that can go together to create a new whole. That's the ambient bit of the coupling. But there's also this interest in prose and the lyric, and the idea that we have a big separation between them. It's an expression of binary thinking, and it's an intervention as well. So, you could use the coupling as a political intervention, and you could use it as a way to subvert an existing text, as I do in 'Horse Chestnut: A Coupling.' Or you might use it to amplify a text, as I do in the Bashō. You can use it in different ways, but its techniques – and there's an article on my website from *Mslexia* where you can get the formal properties – it's this idea that through assonance and rhyme and repetition, you're pushing at the lyric, you're pushing at creating a song through prose. That's one example, and it's intertextual of course. Multidisciplinary conversational work is always of interest to me. I think the days of poetry existing in isolation are over, and that's a great thing.

YR: I am struck by the way that you rework a diverse array of international narratives and forms in *Seasonal Disturbances: The Odyssey*, the *zuihitsu*. Could you say a bit more about how you moved between poems that appear to have a local setting, such as 'On the Thames,' and poems that have a broader geographical reach, such as 'Voyage' and 'The Science of Life 493'?

KMW: To be honest, I don't think about local and international. I think it's all international: or so I'd hope. I think that's partly because coming from London – which is one of the most multicultural cities in the world, and will continue to be so – that's in my ideological DNA. It's everything I know. I can't imagine living in a monocultural environment. I've visited monocultural environments, or seemingly monocultural environments, or seemingly less diverse environments of course, but I think London has that, and it has a huge amount of internationalism.

I'll say a bit about reading as well. The *zuihitsu* is from tenth-century Japan. And it's quite fascinating, because the original *Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon was written in 'colloquial' Japanese – it was still courtly and was still a book of the court, because that was where the

literacy was – but at that point people wrote in Classical Chinese. So even the fact that she wrote that in Japanese (if she were the author): there's subversion there. It was very much a woman's voice, and what happened was that all the male poets wanted to write *zuihitsu*s, and they used to pretend to be women to write them! I loved that. I love the fact that it's a scrolling brush as well, so it was that idea of the water and of the flow, and that runs through the book like a river, like a watery backbone. For me, that gives you the fluidity of the lyric. I wanted to have that because one of the things that I was really thinking about, quite profoundly, was: what is the impact of being on, in or near water? I knew that it impacted me in terms of healing after grief. I'd looked at the work of Matsuoto Emoto, who is deeply unscientific. He took photographs of water molecules, and then looked at their crystalline structure when they were exposed to the sounds of different words. When they 'hear' 'love' or 'happiness' or 'joy', they're very symmetrical – and hilariously, they don't like heavy metal or discordant stuff, and they break up! The scientific criticism of him is that he didn't show every single one: he showed the ones that corresponded. So, that's the critique. But for me, the idea that we can be open to subtle resonances is a very important thing, and a connection that I want the poetry to make, so that it's existing on lots of different dimensions. I was so interested in this idea: what does water do for us? What's that experience? I wrote that whole poem actually physically lying on a barge in the middle of the Thames, so I was always moving and it was very experiential – in the same way that Wordsworth went walking, this was me floating about on the Thames! And also being in the middle of the Thames was important: it was a space that was not north or south, but a hybrid space: one of these liminal spaces that I've always been interested in. That connects formally to the book as well as thematically.

YR: You mentioned poetry with an ecological dimension by Kwame Dawes and Ted Hughes in the interview you did with the Forward Arts Foundation. Which other poets do you admire for their engagement with environmental issues?

KMW: I'll talk about the ones I researched for my PhD: Kei Miller, Joy Harjo and Louise Glück. What I wanted to do with the idea of the sacred hybrid is to think about whether we can apply ecopoetic readings to poets who are never really read as ecopoets. Is Kei Miller an ecopoet? There's a lot about place, relationships with nature, environment, politics and how they impact that, the idea of cartography, all those connections to cultural geography: different systems of mapping, different systems of measurement, and what they might mean. Those things all connect to ecopoetic texts and ecopoetic readings. My interests are around writers who might not necessarily identify as ecopoets. Even though Louise Glück has been called an ecopoet, she doesn't identify as that. I would argue that [it's a term applicable to] any poet who is writing about their environment – and which poet isn't writing about their environment? Thinking again of the Anthropocene, we are at this point where every artist has to engage. There's a huge amount of fun and joy in creating and making the work, and that's not to say that the work has to be overtly political, but I think there is a political purpose to doing it. For me, it's about connecting to people's feelings: that's what poetry can do. That's not to say that other art forms can't do that too, but something that what we want to do in poetry is to make people feel. And if they feel differently, they might think differently. This is what I term an activism of the heart. What I say in my PhD is that Glück's *The Wild Iris* is an ontological, theological and ecological text; it's all of those things at once. And what I'm interested in is how writers use structure as a thematic articulation. So I looked at Joy Harjo. Joy Harjo's work has a shamanic element via the music, but also via the spiritual and sacred knowledge that she is trying to pass on and trying to retain for her culture and community, which has been systematically obliterated by America in its modern form. It's an act of

cultural restoration that she's engaged in. So in that sense, she very much structures the whole of her work based around the idea that if I look out there and there's a tree, there's a relationship, all the trees are in relationship with them, are in relationship with the birds that are in them, and with the squirrels that run beneath them, and that this relationship can be communicative. It's the idea that poetry can speak into that space. Of course, there is a wealth of scholarship that would argue that this, in itself, is anthropocentric projection, but I counter that. What I'm really interested in is the conversation that can happen between science, spirituality and nature: it's not about one negating the other necessarily, and it's not about there being only one way for us to ascertain things. We can ascertain things via empirical processes but we also know that people live on instinct and intuition: these are a big part of things. We can always trace that to a neurological base, but one of the most fascinating things is that when people say to you 'Well, I don't really believe in that, people just think things with their mind,' but they touch their hearts!