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The Ecopoetics of Survival: The *Transborder Immigrant Tool* and *The Desert Survival Series*

The ecopoem is connected to the world, and this implies responsibility. Like other poetic models that assume a connection and engagement (feminism, Marxism, witness, etc.), ecopoetry is surrounded by questions of ethics. Should the ecopoem do something in the world? But how can a poem be said to accomplish anything?

--- James Engelhardt, “The Language Habitat: an Ecopoetry Manifesto”

“Maybe the development of environmental literacy, by which I mean a capacity for reading connections between the environment and its inhabitants, can be promoted by poetic literacy; maybe poetic literacy will be deepened through environmental literacy.”

---Forrest Gander, “The Future of the Past: The Carboniferous & Ecopoetics”

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This paper discusses *The Desert Survival Series*, a group of poems written by Amy Sara Carroll, a UCSD professor, and “published” in an unlikely place, on a computer GPS program called the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, or TBT. The program was created by a civil disobedience and performance art group at UCSD called the *Electronic Disturbance Theatre* (EDT), led by Carroll’s colleague Ricardo Dominguez. The EDT’s works generally use cyber-disruptions to produce forms of political resistance, marshaling chaos in the service of unsettling the *status quo*. The series, in a departure from this strategy, deploys design--the design of the poetic object --as a political resource in aid of a group endangered and abjected by the United States government. The poems provide advice on avoiding the specific natural dangers of a desert, offering directions to water caches for Mexican migrants crossing the Sonoran desert to the country’s border. The program and poems also are meant to publicize the humanitarian crisis in which so many migrants have died of dehydration on their journeys.[[1]](#endnote-1) In the painstaking research behind and creation of these poems, their author, Amy Sara Carroll, has committed herself to the “connection and engagement” by which James Engelhardt defines the ecopoem. According to EDT, the poems are intended to provide not only important information along the way but also solace in the form of human companionship. They establish a human relationship between the creators and the migrants they is meant to help, and whom it addresses with respect and care. The TBT’s poems needed, Carroll writes, to “engage or expand upon our collective vision of the tool as sustenance” and to avoid writing “that functioned best in museum, gallery, and university” (“Ecopoetics,” n.p.). The poems had to alert migrants in a direct fashion to the many, and frightening, risks in the desert but not subject them to the panic that so many survival manuals insist is one of the threats to making it out alive. The poems also had to attend to a reality far more dynamic and mobile than that of museum, gallery, or university. This poetry, crucially, teaches its addressees to walk the desert reading its shifting clues. (Unlike walking in the great classical, Romantic, and Transcendalist traditions, this walking is not leisurely, pleasurably introspective, a source for happy and creative after-reflection.) Though the series is highly contemporary and topical, its goals of instruction and solace go back to ancient poetics, raising questions about the nature and uses of poetry in contemporary contexts, particularly national and ecocritical.

The *Desert Survival Series* participates in the always-ongoing revision of the Euro-American poetic tradition, a revision constantly responding to the moment’s political context. It also intervenes in debates about the nation and its borders. It articulates an avant-garde poetics while being accessible to a wide range of readers and listeners; though not obviously experimental, it is breaking new ground in setting, context, purposes, and language(s). The poems have at least three audiences—the migrants themselves, the presumably progressive viewer-readers who see them online or in museum exhibitions and may be moved to intervene in the humanitarian crisis, and the governmental actors responsible for the situation. How could the poems be meaningful to a group of endangered Mexican citizens, some, at least, illiterate but all coming from a culture steeped in song and poetry? How could they address the humanity of these migrants whom, as Carroll ruefully acknowledges, the discourse of “illegal aliens” abjects and depersonalizes? Carroll confronts these demands, drawing a poetry from her own political and literary understanding, from Latin American writing and performance art, from her own experience of the desert, from autobiographies of desert survivors, and from “texts about desert survival: handbooks, military manuals, [and] a guide for border-crossers briefly distributed by the Mexican government” (“Ecopoetics,” n.p.). At the same time, she presents the desert crossing not as a heroic victory over a challenging environment, but as an attempt to understand and therefore survive it. Deeply engaged with the desert, the poems attempt to engage with the natural world without appropriating, demonizing, or idealizing what they describe. Instead, they crucially teach first the poet and then the desert crosser new depths of focus and perception. The aesthetic and practical overlap in this regard: both poets and travelers depend on being able to perceive, to read, the world. Perhaps counterintuitively, the poetry also calls on the resources of poetic traditions and counter-traditions. These two aims, however, converge in the mandate of some current ecopoetry and ecocriticism to renew and query the modes of poetry about the (post)natural environment.

To underline the point, these poems are not only an intervention in the politics and ecology of the border, but in the poetic field and in poetics. A politically charged object, the TBT device has been shown in exhibitions around the country, and has helped improve awareness of the humanitarian crisis, as it was intended to do. It has been the focus of fierce debates about the rights of undocumented migrants, about militarization of the border, about funding by state universities, about the value of higher education, about what professors (in general, and these specifically) think they’re doing. What I wish to focus on, however, is exactly what has not been seriously discussed about these poems, their status as the particular project of a specific poet (though in consultation with other members of the group)[[2]](#endnote-2) with interesting implications for activism and ecopoetics, for the uses in poetry of randomness and design, for the allegiances in writing to pleasure and to usefulness.

The instruction in the series, specific though it may be to the particular situation of migrants, also teaches skills in reading the environment: most urgently, in aid of immediate survival for migrants, but also long-term for everyone else as well. This huge task entails disparate strategies, all pointing to reading as revelation: intense observation of the desert environment, a review of literary and cultural approaches to the natural world, and an appreciation of local environments as part of a larger, dynamic, global politics and ecology. Human survival depends on this learning, and guidance in reading allows the illegible—the random and chaotic—to become legible. Ecocriticism involves a critique of the way that we represent the environment, acknowledging that to represent is to construct the world, with material consequences. Therefore it makes sense to look at the history of the way that the arts have depicted landscape and nature. The act of reading takes place in an intertextual field of literary and cultural references. Landscape bears a heavy weight of philosophical, cultural, and political history. In the case of poetry, that history often centers on the evolution and revision of poetic genres such as pastoral and georgic, but it takes in a range of other frames. Carroll’s poems respond to such a history, but also consider recent literature and film. Reminding his reader that the human is part of nature, that “[h]uman ecology is a study of the relationship between human culture and nonhuman nature” Robert Boschman points to the ecocritic’s understanding of “how a particular text deals with nature and the human community, and how that relationship in a particular place and time actually works.” From this perspective, he adds, literature “does matter and does have an impact … [and] the job of the ecocritic is to draw out that impact.” (8). Polemics and other, subtler methods of communication address humanity and its nature in *The Desert Survival Series.*

Although it was created in 2007 the TBT has certainly not outlived its own polemical significance. As I write this essay in November of 2018, thousands of troops—and worse, militias--are waiting at the border to confront the “caravan” of migrants heading north from Central America. What deadliness and chaos will happen is a matter for terrified conjecture, even more frightening than the sandstorms and diamondbacks along the Mexican migrants’ way that Carroll’s work addresses. The outcome will depend in part on contingency—on what combination of unpredictable actions and responses by huge crowds of overwrought people, states of armed preparation, even weather--may produce. In this situation, the randomness of events could have been, perhaps still can be, mitigated by thoughtful design. Ordinary reliance on policy and legislation would be a first step. More systemically, addressing climate change, improving economic conditions in Central America, decreasing the drug market in the United States by decriminalizing drugs and addiction—all of these would require actions by design.

Normally, contemporary aesthetic discourse about randomness and design gives the former a privileged position as the more emancipatory and innovative mode.[[3]](#endnote-3) Randomness has often been seen by both modern and postmodern artists as a refusal of cliché, a way to defamiliarize the everyday, to leap beyond ordinary habits of perception and often, by extension, to think beyond current social and politic structures[[4]](#endnote-4). It can, of course, work that way. Design in the life-and-death situation of the desert borderlands, however, also forms part of planning and organizing for greater social justice. The TBT brings restorative design, both aesthetic and practical, to bear upon a situation and an environment singularly lacking in design, at least at first glance: the chaotic, risky environment of the Sonoran desert. Carroll provides design in the deliberateness of her poetic series—a gift of conscious succor to the migrants it addresses—and in the way the poems urge attention, perception, and understanding upon those migrants. The whole program and the specific poems represent an attempt to use design as part of a practice, and an ethics, of support, care, and welcome. In this instance, ethics and aesthetics align, and design is emancipatory. Bracketing for a moment the need for activist publicity, Carroll’s writing is first of all attuned to two perspectives, hers as the scholar of the desert and that of the migrant for whom the desert is only terrifying randomness. She has gained deep knowledge and can detect patterns, helping the traveling person to master contingency and irregularity. In her poetry she teaches the reader/listener--not just the migrant but other audiences--to observe, to elicit what is patterned and productive in a seemingly unlivable situation.

For Carroll, the writing is attuned to two perspectives, hers as the scholar of the desert and that of the migrant for whom the desert is only terrifying randomness. She has acquired knowledge through study and experience and thus can detect a pattern, helping the traveler to master contingency and irregularity. In her poetry she teaches the reader/listener to observe, to elicit what is patterned and productive in a seemingly unlivable situation. The poems teach the walking migrant or the armchair reader to be observant. Teaching perception of natural phenomena (including humans) and their interrelatedness makes human survival more possible—the sun causes heat stroke; the sun makes plants in the Northern hemisphere point South, offering legible sign-posts for the initiated; other people, potentially ICE agents or narcotics dealers, can do harm as well. At the same time such attention diminishes fantasies of control. Even for the migrant following these directions perfectly, contingency can be fatal; make it to the water barrel, and you may find a hive of killer bees inside the lid. The poems instruct, terrify, soothe, urge survival; they are like advice from a loving but very realistic friend. (She never says how much migrants must need to come to the US if they are willing to risk their lives in this way, but gives a matter-of-fact description of its terrors and dangers that makes the need implicit.) Carroll produces not an exciting adventure story but, in her realism, a riposte to the archaic cowboy Western’s idea of a charismatic (white) frontier hero. Every poem in the series acknowledges the direness of the migrant’ circumstances, but in an unsensational way that without sentimentality suggests the strong wish of the speaker that the listener prevail against them. She repeats the most unarguably important advice, in poem 14: “Drink water, rest in the shade, seek water at twilight. …Redux: Drink water, rest in the shade, seek water at twilight.” She praises the most resilient of the desert’s flora and fauna—the creosote bush that comes back unperturbed from a thermonuclear blast, the cactus that saves moisture, the peccaries that can “divine permanence” (another way of reading the landscape) in the water supply; even the tarantulas who have more than one line of defense. The history of other desert crossers can suggest lifelines: poem 3 tells how “just before sunrise, Bedouins turned over half-buried stones in the desert to catch the dew that the night's coolness had condensed on the stones' surfaces.”

If ecology is the study of natural interrelatedness, ecopoetics insists upon responsibility not only to the nonhuman world but to other humans as well. It also ponders the relationship between the world and the way writing is brought into being. In poem 17 of the series, for example, Carroll emphasizes the need for care in deadly surroundings, her own care for the migrants through the poem and theirs for themselves in self-preserving attentiveness. As Engelhardt suggest in the first epigraph above, acknowledging responsibility is not enough; you need both to care for, and then to take care of, people and the environment. “Approach rocky trails with caution, especially in the dark or after a thunderstorm. Falls from steep slopes represent the second leading cause of injury and death in the desert (the first being dehydration).” Carroll brings this matrix of concerns together in a self-reflexive environmental poetry that reviews the options for nature poetry in the post-natural, that is to say, anthropocene, world. As Forrest Gander suggests in the epigraph above, environmental literacy and poetic literacy can promote one another. (217).

The aesthetic seriousness of Carroll’s work in the TBT has not always been understood. “When there's been mention of poetry,” the poet Amy Sara Carroll said, “it's been rather derisive in the popular press coverage. I think it's often been posed more as a question: Are these people really serious? Did they think this would be at all useful or this is a cover for the project? There's also a way in which the poems have stunned certain opposition into silence. For instance, we were on MSNBC Live—Ricardo and I, right after Christmas—[with] this person, Bob Dane from the Federation for Immigration Reform. So we got asked by Contessa Brewer, 'Is this really poetry?' and I just said, ‘Yes.' And then there were, like, 20 seconds of silence (Moran).” The bafflement and suspicion about the poems suggested at the MSNBC interview was a mild precursor to the furor about *The Desert Survival Series* that was occasioned by another unlikely television moment. In the autumn of 2010, Glenn Beck, not known for his literary interests, read aloud a piece of poetry on his then new online program, *TheBlaze* (Moyers). To orient readers unfamiliar with the show, Beck was a regular commentator on Fox News, the most consistently right-wing of the US TV news programs, and he continues in various media to purvey of an impressive range of paranoid anti-progressive positions. In what Maryam Gharavi calls “his own brand of sublime hysterics” (n.p.), Beck created this headline for the TBT program: “UCSD Professors Dissolve U.S. — Give GPS Phones With Explicit Poetry to Illegals for Border Crossing.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Every second word in this sentence could use a corrective gloss, but here I will merely point out that the GPS system does not direct these migrants across the border, but to the water caches mentioned above. Nor do the poems, which focus on giving clear advice about desert risks.

Although the EDT had not expected the intensity or the many directions of the attack that resulted from their launch of the *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, their political work in fact consists largely of provocations towards the goal of social justice. While *The Desert Survival Series* implements a poetics and politics of design, neither Carroll nor the EDT group as a whole avoids randomness in every instance. In fact, much of the group’s work is what Carroll in her preface calls “dislocative” (“Ecopoetics,” n.p.). In an interview, Dominguez explains that the “TBT connects un/expectedly to borders, nature, desert and global positioning via a geo-poetic disturbance and dis-locating prophecy.” As their name makes clear, the provocations of the *Electronic Disturbance Theater* work by creating disruption and high drama, breaking up business as usual. At the same time, the sophisticated design of the EDT’s actions offsets a different, malign unpredictability and disorder that is imposed upon the lives of migrants. The design of the apparatus (camera, phone, program), like that of the poetry, is to elicit pattern and regularity and design for a person who’s not in a position to receive it—to make the lethal navigable and survivable. As a computer program providing potentially life-saving orientation and audio poetry, the TBT balances careful planning with occasional randomness. A mapping aid, it nonetheless proclaims itself as “dislocative”: opposing the governmental GPS systems that track migrants, but also dislocating systems of power and meaning. Even its programming incorporates some randomness; the line of code indicates the (non)order in which the audio should deliver the poems: “// this thread to randomly play audio file.” In other computer-assisted actions, the EDT has created “virtual sit-ins” in which followers overwhelm official websites with simultaneous log-ins; their acts of civil disobedience depend upon a certain amount of chaos (Schactman, n.p.). The TBT and its exhibitions often deploy tactics of disorientation and upheaval. Beck’s publicity for the TBT brought hate mail, death threats, and university investigations to its creators. To the mounting attacks against them, EDT responded with both fear and jubilation. Poetry, it turns out, occasionally does make something happen. “EDT is very happy to know,” the group’s leader posted on the EDT website, “from so many folks around the nativist U.S. communities that poetry still has the power to move and disturb the arcs of the realities. ... I am sure this will DISSOLVE THE U.S. - perhaps the planet - even faster than neo-liberal/neo-con economic policies or BP oil spills or . . . add your own fav way to dissolve ;-).” Choosing slyly to misunderstand Beck in several directions—to imagine Beck improbably fearing his own economic politics, the degradation of the ocean, planetary destruction—Dominguez at the same time puts his own spin on what kind of dissolution he himself might endorse: of borders, nation, xenophobic and racist structures.

So EDT makes different interventions for different occasions, with different strategies for disturbing the powerful and for supporting the disenfranchised. Carroll had written an earlier set of poems for the TBT, one that she eventually decided was suited for galleries and agit-prop rather than for the desert. Both that series and its gallery setting, though highly developed, were much closer in affect to a poetics of randomness than the final series. In an email, Carroll wrote that the poem Beck had played, “Transition,” was part of that first series. “It is included on phones in exhibition displays of the work. [In one we] created a sound installation wherein the recordings of approximately 65 poems sounded off in a timed sequence across six phones. The poems included were from both series and were in 14 languages. (The idea was one of disorientation--that few to no museum-goers would understand all of what they heard)” (November 1, 2018). While the migrants required poems furthering an intense focus on surviving the desert, the EDT planned for the museum-goers to have an experience of disruption and disorder, of the chaos from which they hoped to help the migrants escape. In fourteen simultaneous languages, moreover, Babel-like linguistic discordance evokes the global disturbances that have already forced so many migrations in this century.

Beyond Beck’s outburst very little attention was paid at first to the poems themselves or their relation to the more clearly functional aspects of the program. In fact, very little has been written about the poems as poems, though they are generally mentioned in descriptions of the overall project. I will not focus on the relation of the poems to computer programming, as that has been covered at length, and much better than I could do.[[6]](#endnote-6) But they form an integral part of the tool, and one that creates a powerful verbal complement to its digital component. The EDT is clear about the importance of the program’s poetry for its overall mission: “[i]ts code is executable when and if one adds the coordinates of functional water caches to its poetic program. Its poetry, another executable code [is] included here after our project statement.” To define the language of poetry this way is witty, but it also creates a productive strangeness: to describe the aesthetic object this way produces a jolt, a question about what poetry really is. If the poetry is executable, what does it do? And if code, in what would the decoding consist? In her prefatory essay for the series, “Of EcoPoetics and Dislocative Media,” Carroll writes that “[a]t base, I worked from two assumptions. A desert is not just a desert. And, poetry-becoming-code/code-becoming-poetry could transubstantiate, translate into a lifesaving technology, sounding off.”[[7]](#endnote-7) “Sounding off” suggests a chance to vent some political anger, while transubstantiation allows the TBT to become something more than its elements, and translation reveals meaning to both migrant and creator. To transform in this way, binary code needed to cede precedence to words.

What would most people be likely to think a poem is? Probably not this prose: in poem 14 of the series Carroll writes, “Cholla, or jumping cactus, attaches. A bud of spines breaks off at the slightest hint of touch. Remove cholla from your skin and clothing in increments, with a rock, a stick, a knife: the bud . . . large spines left behind . . . small spines or glochids. Needling needles that remain will work themselves out in the days ahead.” In general, poetry is not currently thought of as providing instructions or information, or as presenting the straightforwardness of most of the language, without frequent recourse to decorative touches or the evocation of beauty (though these do occasionally occur). Notwithstanding, however, one can imagine the unreadiness of a morning news show to take any postmodern poems on board, or in fact any unfamiliar ones; poetry and its discussion don’t have the pace of “breaking news,” artificial as that pace must be. In spite of the abovementioned reactions of Contessa Brewer on MSNBC and Glenn Beck on TheBlaze, however, I have not found that Carroll’s poems have caused any debates about Brewer’s question: *is* Carroll’s series poetry? Further, if it is poetry, what makes it so, and what cultural relevance does it obtain?

The direct purposefulness of Carroll’s poems opposes a popular idea of poetry as emotionally discursive, even aimless, primarily sentimental. Why is the cholla passage from poem 14 a poem and not a prose fragment, lacking as it does rhyme and meter, or a recognizable form of free verse? Syntactically, the works in the series do not announce themselves as “poetic”; they are not particularly hypotactic; they introduce little subordination or complex sentence structure. But if one way of describing a poem is as a creative work that considers its own relationship to language and that has meaning in relation to a poetic tradition, these are indeed poems. *The Desert Survival* *Series* mediates between several traditions. For one, Latin American political poetry responding to histories of political oppression makes a clearly appropriate context for the series, and an epigraph from the Chilean dissident poet Raúl Zurita places her work in this tradition. Carroll is by her birth in the twentieth century an heir of modernism, and the minimalism of some of the poems recalls pared-down works by writers like Williams, H.D., Pound in his haiku phase.

Strikingly, however, Carroll’s are also poems of instruction, linking themselves to Anglo-American traditions of pastoral, georgic, and didactic poetry that can seem unlikely precedents for radical contemporary writing. Nonetheless, they share the goal of much of that writing, to revise received wisdom and situate itself in a larger literary world. Carroll reads both poetry and landscape attentively—but not only that, also to, to connect the worlds of Virgil and Zurita. The poems take from these southern and northern sources what they can offer. What they add to these is a politics of care. In the case of *The Desert Survival Series*, such a politics links to the work of replacing the potential randomness of the desert crossing with aesthetic and practical design, illegibility with legibility. They teach their audience, moreover, how to read in a way that goes beyond superficial understanding. *The Desert Survival Series*’ introductory poem begins by insisting that the desert is readable and navigable, if one knows how: “an ecosystem, with a logic of sustainability: of orientation, unique unto itself.” For example, if the barrel cactus--known otherwise as the compass cactus--stockpiles moisture, it also affords direction. As clear as an arrow or a constellation, it leans south. Orient yourself by this mainstay or by flowering plants that, growing toward the sun, face south in the Northern Hemisphere.” Nonhuman life has an orientation of its own that can on occasion save humans if we can learn to look at it. Reading skills, Carroll insists, are crucial: “Proceed from the simple premise: The desert caches water in unlikely places that it resists divulging (poem 5).” The poems are full of injunctions to read signs: in poem 7, “The flight paths of birds, like pigeons and doves, indicate the proximity of an oasis. They drink in the evenings. If they are flying low and slow, follow their direction. Where they came from may be where you need to go to refill bottles or canteens.” In poem 12, “Found in dead wood and debris, the brown recluse carries a dark, violin-shaped trademark on its back.” She knows better than to provide guarantees; sometimes the signs are misleading, or tricky: poisonous saguaro cacti can look like safe-to-drink barrel cacti. Nonetheless, the survival manuals Carroll studied urge their readers to think of the desert, lethal as it so often proves, not as the enemy but as an entity of which one is part. More deeply integrative than the TBT computer program, the poems seek to know the desert, rather than simply provide advice on how to survive it.

The poet is embedding her advice in a very large geographical and historic frame, one large enough to engage the reader or hearer in a multi-faceted meditation upon the desert. Her epigraph to the foreword is from Zurita—“Quién hablaría de la soledad del desierto” (50)--Who would tell of the desert's loneliness—sets the tone, and she gives an answer. It makes sense to write to a desert-crosser about why sandstorms are dangerous and how to survive them—you don’t have to start with Herodotus and Cambyses, as Carroll does, to bring in that whole range of cultural reference. Moments like that put the series in a poetic framework of literary reference not necessarily familiar to the people hearing or reading it, but not obstructive to them either. A great king can lose 50,000 men to a sandstorm: YOU better watch out! In understated allusions, Carroll also imports the world of cult desert fiction and cinema. When Carroll counsels the traveler that “[s]and and rock reflect warmth and light as if you were walking on a metallic liquid or "ashes of time” (poem 21), in a witty move she names the 1994 film directed by Kar-Wai Wong in which a hit man operates from the desert in ancient China (IMDB). The mention of the “Fremen” of Herbert’s Dune allows for some witty punning on the title: “Like rocky trails, desert dunes are walkable. Learn to read this terrain, too. Traverse dune desert arrhythmically--Fremen-style. Eschew dunes' angled leeward bases. Hike their hallowed hollows in between, keeping a lookout for small holes (that mark tunnels) and conical depressions of silt.” The Fremen are aquacentric: because their planet is a desert, their whole culture revolves around conserving their own bodily moisture; their “arrhythmic” desert crossing allows them to avoid the ferocious sandworms--that live in tunnels marked by holes in the sand. The allusion is humorous, but it also relays a warning: the walker must remain as focused on hydration and desert dangers as these warriors. The allusion also suggests the mutations of the Fremens’ planet: randomness creates mutations. Mutations are lethal, neutral, or beneficial to the organism; when they stick, they seem to become design (as in the poem about storms making a pattern on the sand); that is, they give the appearance of design. Sometimes, too, as in the case of the Fremen or the other natural phenomena Carroll describes, the design is real, an evolutionary trace.

Sometimes, however, the design she calls attention to is that of writing. Carroll’s imagery moves in unexpected formations between the desert, the world surrounding it, and a literary potentiality inside. It calls attention to a political consciousness that is also a consciousness of the act of writing. In poem 2: “Climb or walk in the morning. Rest midday beneath creosote bush or mesquite, insulating yourself from the superheated ground. Remember—even the sidewinder hovercrafts, the bulk of its body above the scalding sand as it leaves its trademark J-shaped tracks across the desert dunes.” The phrase “J-shaped tracks” catches the attention here as tonally anomalous in this poem, highlighting both the “trademark” language of advertising and the letter J of written language. These are unexpected in this pared-down message of instruction, but they will be picked up in later poems, and here they hint at the consumption of nature and people by the economic forces that drive people into the desert, lined with *maquiladoras*, in the first place.[[8]](#endnote-8) Similarly, poem 4 gives rules for distinguishing between edible and poisonous cacti, the deadly saguaro and the safe barrel cactus and then moves outward. “So don’t just look for squat, rounded cacti: differentiate, think fishhook. J-shaped outer “fishhook” spines, literally used by the Seri Indians for fishing, mark and distinguish the true rescue cactus from its peers.” At the same time, the poems suggest a writing consciousness, and in the insistence on the letter J even a low-key homage to writing itself. The next-to-last poem of the series, uses typography to create an X-shape on the page, describing what she calls “the universally known shape of an emergency flare: an X.” In poem 17, she reminds the hearer that “desert dunes are walkable”: one should “learn to read this terrain, too.” In 19, she urges the post-floodwaters traveler to “criss-cross their artistry—patterns in the sand, sculpted as a topographic map or an open book in Braille.” In poem 20, she calls the tarantulas “book-lunged arachnids” who blow “missives,” their silvery hairs, at enemies. “Book-lunged” is actually a scientific term based on the folded tissue of some arachnids’ lungs, but these big spiders have a decidedly literary air. Poem 8 ends with what is practically a tribute to reading, though perhaps an equivocal one, as writing can do damage as well as good: “Tuck your eyeglasses into your shirt or jacket pocket (so the wind will not etch its soliloquies into them).” At the same time she accords beauty and pleasure in the desert surroundings expression and value: “In the summertime, pitahaya dulce, the fruit of the organ pipe cactus, ripens to red and drops its spines. The prickly pear cactus' tuna reddens to purple, but never loses its needles. Dethorned, dethroned, both are delectably edible. Peel their skins” (5). Naming color, naming flavor, Carroll creates one of the few sensually appealing moments in the series. “Dethorned, dethroned”: the pleasure consists in sight and taste, but also in ear and mind, in a word-play that indicates the transformations of language and its transformative power. The play on syllables and the beauty of the cactus flowers, not to mention the revolutionary pleasure of deposing a king, act as a moment of relief in a poem that concentrates on warning against death and injury.

The emphasis of the series on instruction places it both in and in opposition to several powerful traditions. Instruction is by its very nature ideological, and these poems institute a different set of politics from those of classical antiquity. Willard Spiegelman, in his study of didactic poetry, insists that “pedagogic strategies” can comprehend a range of styles and modes, and that American poetry has inherited many of these, including the "direct pronouncement, incisive wit, meandering contemplation, cogent reductiveness, [and …] embodiments of ideas in images" (24) that he attributes to Auden but that characterize Carroll’s series as well. By drawing on the resources of ongoing poetic traditions and counter-traditions, the TBT poems offer design that calls up older genres, but significantly revises them. Their shadow-drama portrays poetic inheritance and negotiations with literary tradition.

Carroll’s poems, for instance, may not bear much immediate resemblance to pastoral and georgic, two versions of the idealized classical rural that are associated with escapism, what Victoria Silver refers to l as an “instrumental fiction … whose efficacy at ordering the world requires that it too stand outside of time and the actual contingency of things” (36), and Raymond Williams as “a myth functioning as a memory” (43). For both, pastoral evokes a simpler, less existentially fraught set of mind and way of life, a fantasy operating in the vision of an America without immigrants, self-sufficient, “great” in ways that matter. Williams’ fabricated “memory” retains a lot of power. Not all pastoral idealizes, however. It is important also to recognize the presence in classical pastoral of a more negative strain.[[9]](#endnote-9) For example, in pastoral the shepherds complain about the weather and the sheep’s illnesses, but also about death and exile; in georgic, they may lose their hives or their crops, and these disasters reflect larger realities of war, loss, and mortality. Virgil’s Book IV, for example, ends with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, but all four books are suffused with the anguish or recent events. It is the arrival of Augustus, rewarding his veterans with land wrested from owners who then became vagrants, that has sent Meliboeus on the road in Book I.

Recent environmentally focused discussions and poetic practices of pastoral have refused an idealized worldview, especially relative to environmental degradation. Terry Gifford reflects that “a delight in nature is usually associated with a celebratory attitude to what it describes, however superficially bleak it might appear to be… but a Greenpeace supporter might use the term as a criticism of [a] tree poem if it ignored the presence of pollution or the threat to urban trees from city developers” (2). For instance, Joshua Corey uses the term “post-pastoral, for the sense that the prefix “post-” gives to the object it modifies as that which is conditioned by that object but which also strugglesit, trying to become something new” (n.p.). Carroll’s series is like a desert post-pastoral, foregoing the utopian brightness for a dark, “*ego et in arcadia*” manner, in which the exigencies of nature require song for solace. In poem 7, Carroll writes: “Cottonwoods spread a welcome shade. Clusters also indicate a desert stream or an underground spring close to the surface.” These lines provide excellent advice for those trying to survive while crossing the desert, but they also recall Virgil’s *Eclogue One*, in which Meliboeus, about to be exiled, reproaches the friend who can devote himself to beautiful song while his own world is in tormented upheaval: “You, Tityrus, lie under the canopy of a spreading beech, wooing the woodland Muse on slender reed, but we are leaving our country’s bounds and sweet fields. We are outcasts from our country; you, Tityrus, at ease beneath the shade, teach the woods to re-echo “fair Amaryllis.” Like the Sonoran migrants, Meliboeus and his comrades will suffer painful journeys, longing for the relief of shade. Carroll may not have these precedents specifically in mind, but they are sufficiently foundational for poetry about nature to have been absorbed and replicated throughout that tradition, the tradition that current ecopoetics writes after, through, with, and against.

Carroll’s poems are georgics, originally detailed verse manuals of agricultural knowledge, in an altered sense: they give step-by-step instructions for methods of survival, though in a landscape very far from that of the European georgic tradition. Unlike the georgic, however, Carroll’s poetry attends to the nomadic rather than georgic’s forms of settled cultivation. The georgic from Virgil onward has promoted the development of agriculture, of community, and most significantly a politics of order and status quo. It could not have accounted for the kinds of population flows catalyzed by late capitalism. So this earlier poetic and social design, by its stasis and conservatism, could not answer Carroll’s purposes without significant revision. Again, a comparison with Virgil clarifies the differences and similarities. One of the main activities in georgic is beekeeping, and Virgil sees it, humorously but also seriously, as a reflection of state preoccupations:

A marvellous display of puny powers,

High-hearted chiefs, a nation's history,

Its traits, its bent, its battles and its clans,

All, each, shall pass before you, while I sing. (Book IV, p. 50)

Carroll’s Poem 9 discusses bees too, and she also reads them politically:

… "Killer," or "assassin bees," the descendants of migrants (themselves the descendants of twenty-six Tanzanian bees accidentally released in southeast Brazil), are aggressively territorial. Almost identical in appearance to kinder and gentler bee populations, Africanized bees--now the reigning queens and workers of the Sonoran Desert--congregate near water holes and flowering cacti. Killer bees will defend their hives against perceived threats, attacking by the thousands. Do not pass within thirty meters of their colonies (eminent domains), constructed in veritable earthworks (mounds and cavities), cacti trunks, creosote, mesquite, former travelers' lay-up sites … .

Almost imperceptibly, the passage brings together a number of sinister suggestions of a disordered and rapacious state: “assassins,” “eminent domain” (the power of the government to take private property), colonies, and the purportedly benign social organizations of bees now gone murderous. In 1988, when accepting his party's nomination for president, George H. W. Bush said that he wanted the United States to become a “gentler and kinder” nation. (It didn’t take long for the words to become a catchphrase for political hypocrisy.) These hints reflect back upon the poem’s opening pronouncement: that the killer bees are “the descendants of migrants (themselves the descendants of twenty-six Tanzanian bees accidentally released in southeast Brazil), are aggressively territorial. Those who live above the Mexican-American border too are descendants of migrants, released to North America by historical, sometimes random, events, and now fiercely and unreflectively defending a territory. This poem offers perhaps the most complex of the interactions between what one might describe as the mobile ecology of the poems and the border politics of Carroll’s series, but it also suggests a new range of revision of earlier tropes. The topics preoccupying these early forms reappear as nightmare versions in Carroll’s poems. In pastoral, the shepherds must keep their

flocks watered and fed, and generally manage to do so; in the *Desert Series*, access to water and food is rare. Georgic, meanwhile, focuses on bee-keeping and on tending and harvesting crops. In the desert, both bees and plants can prove lethal. As Leonie S. Joubert writes, “deserts are only bad news to creatures that have not evolved there. They provide a niche for any plants and animals entrepreneurial enough to adapt and make this place home” (158). Carroll makes clear that humans have not been among the adaptive creatures

Thus history, language, and literature become part of the landscape, even part of the eco-system. In "Of Ecopoetics and Dislocative Media," her foreword to the series, Carroll describes the thinking behind her development of the poems, comparing the desert to other natural sites that have received the dead, often the murdered, bodies of unwanted people. The desert, then, is actually anything but empty; the perceiver who can read it correctly finds it very full. Nor is it an abstraction. To see it as either empty or abstract is to read it unperceptively. She rejects the terms in which poetry has traditionally represented landscape, setting an abstracted or symbolic landscape against a historical and material reality that will have various but specific outcomes. (One can think of the poems as a preview of global desertification, sandstorms, flash floods, and all.) “Ecology holds trauma and promise simultaneously, is neither beautiful nor sublime per se, but becomes part of a larger built environment that regulates the policing and disciplining of ungrammatical bodies.” ("Of Ecopoetics.") These bodies don’t fit in to a North American grammar (or a fascist one) because they are brown and because migrants are not rooted to any specific soil. In the desert, moreover, no possibility exists for framing the lives of workers in idealizing agricultural terms when their sole objective is to move through it. Even sands move: in sandstorms, “winds transubstantiate the landscape into unidentified flying objects.” (Poem 9.) When asked about the TBT as an ecological artwork, Ricardo Dominguez, the EDT’s leader quoted some of Carroll’s writing in the group’s play *Sustenance: A Play for All Trans [ ] Borders.* Carroll argues there that the way that “the Mexican/US border, and all borders perhaps” (n.p.) are currently enforced has interlocking environmental and political effects. “The border participates,” she suggests, “in what Rob Nixon has termed the ‘slow violence’ of the neo-liberal dismantling of bio-citizenship … that crosses between multiple forms of life: from black bears to plants to water to global labor as borderized-entities that are blocked from geographic movement, which is the blocking of life itself” (n.p.). As Franca Bellarsi observes, “Nature actually turns out, in certain respects, to be one of the most ineluctably transnational realities of all. (72.)

I opened the paper with Engelhardt’s half-joking question: “how can a poem be said to accomplish anything?” This series answers that question in several ways, I opened the paper with Engelhardt’s half-joking question: “how can a poem be said to accomplish anything?” This series answers that question in several ways, the practical purpose of instructing migrants on how to survive in the desert being the most obvious and clearly still very necessary. Another is to participate in the revising of literary tradition by ecopoetics and ecocriticism. Yet another purpose is related to pleasure and directed at non-migrants. And finally, centrally, as I have reiterated throughout this essay, the poems retrain the physical and mental eye to perceive in more profound ways. If, as Horace insisted, poetry must be *dulce et utile*, pleasurable and instructive, *The Desert Series* attends to pleasure but, given the circumstances of its making, leans more towards the *utile* side of the poetic equation. Such pedagogy has environmental as well as sociopolitical implications. Carroll addresses a lack of awareness resembling what some scientists call “plant blindness,” “the inability to see or notice the plants in one's own environment, leading to the inability to recognize the importance of plants in the biosphere and in human affairs” (Wandersee and Schussler, 84.) This blindness comprises, among other things, the inability to see pattern and design in natural systems. In the case of the desert, the blindness encompasses natural processes more generally, a much more general human deficit. In this way her poetry addresses not only those migrants who are in desperate need of her advice, but people in general. Moya asks “[h]ow can a cultural practice, an aesthetic intervention, a poem, or a work of art orient our attention, putting into focus people and phenomena previously unseen? How, short, can art be activism?” (40). It is not only the migrants’ perception that needs retraining; a government, a country, a world, needs to learn to focus on the great transnational changes happening to people and the environment. Orienting in their address to migrants, counterintuitive and complicatedly disorienting with reference to their poetic domain, the poems are of great interest, making an intervention in the domain of poetry, as well as in in the context of political activism—of ecology, of the border.

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1. As it has turned out, the program has not been made available for a variety of reasons, including investigations of the EDT and the changing narco-politics of the region. Alison Reed’s essay on the avant-garde nature of this possibly undoable enterprise sees the “generative failure” of the TBT as deliberate, a “queer provisionality” that highlights the dystopian nature of the United States’s power structures. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Carroll discussed the poems with EDT as she was developing them. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew J. Koehler and Punyashloke Mishra, for example, discuss a twenty-first century resurgence of of randomly-generated computer art framed by a history of modernist and postmodern incorporation of contingency and randomness. For instance, instance Marcel Duchamp's random dropped-string painting, “Network Stoppages,” and Kurt Schwitters’s chance-formed collages, seemed to promise access to parts of the creative mind not normally available to the conscious mind. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Schapiro, for example, sees “Randomness as a new mode of composition, whether of simple geometric units or of sketchy brushstrokes, has become an accepted sign of modernity, a token of freedom and ongoing bustling activity,” 65.

   5 For the original online posting, see Glenn Beck, ThBlaze, August 10, 2010 <https://www.theblaze.com/news/2010/08/31/ucsd-professors-want-to-dissolve-us-give-gps-phones-with-explicit-poetry-to-illegals-for-border-crossing> (accessed October 1, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. To my mind, Moya’s beautiful essay best relates the poetry of the TBT to its computer program. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Of Ecopoetics and Dislocative Media” is Carroll’s foreword to the poems, in which she discusses some of the influences and other thinking that generated them. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mark Marino comments helpfully on Carroll’s frequent shifts of diction and register. “Abruptly, the sentence switches its frame [from talking about cacti] with the metaphor of “stockpiles,” an industrial term more often used not in survival but in accumulations of destructive materials. And again, she shifts registers with “affords,” a term with deep resonance in the realm of tool design, programming” (Marino, paragraph 18). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)