

Stephen Collis & Jordan Scott

*d*ecomp

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***Earth Works:
Field Notes on Decomp***
A foreword by Jonathan Skinner

'Books would be nesting material mostly.'

- Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us*

*'What has taken place outside? This is not for us
to say.'*

- Decomp

'The time of the poem is not human time.'

- Maurice Blanchot, *The Book To Come*

In the balance of nature, or food chain, or great chain of being, or ecosystem, or economy, some bodies feed on other bodies, some bodies work together, some bodies work for other bodies and some bodies produce, some bodies die and some bodies go on living. And somebody writes, and somebody thinks.

How did we get from some bodies to somebody? *Decomp* takes the text best known for exploring this question, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and subjects it to an experiment to find how we get from somebody back to some bodies: 'I'm not going to put the natural into the text, I'm going to put the text out into the natural world and see what happens to it' (all quotations from *Decomp* unless otherwise noted).

If a book decomposes in a forest, will anyone read it? Who will nest in it? *Decomp* redefines our understanding of the act of reading and of what a book is, if not a forest, asking us to rethink who, or what, a ‘somebody’ is.

The books were placed open on the ground to be read by these biogeoclimatic zones for a calendar year. Reading meets comminution; ‘the action of reducing a material, an ore, to minute particles or fragments,’ says the dictionary. *Decomp* plants an ecological trope in the physical environment – a trope famous since Thoreau saw in old books ‘a certain fertility, an Ohio soil, as if they were making a humus for new literatures to spring in. ... Decayed literature makes the richest of all soils’ (Thoreau, *Journal*, 16 March 1852). Gary Snyder characterized poetry as cultural ‘detritus cycling’: ‘the fruiting body of the buried threads of mycelia that run widely through the [social] soil, intricately married to the root hairs of all the trees’ (‘Poetry, Community & Climax,’ *The Real Work*). Jed Rasula deployed a composting metaphor to articulate what he calls the ‘composting tradition’ in American poetry: ‘The Romantic phase of English poetry is separated from that later branch we know as American by nothing less than ... the first full

opening of a field of archaic, scattered, incomplete, and scarcely surmised literacies from that compost library unearthed in the nineteenth century’ (*This Compost*).

Decomp posits an inaccessible outside to writing, the ‘stifling density of an accumulation of syllables’ (Blanchot) that is yet an adjacent thing. *I read, I rot*: conjugations of tense? ‘*Dichtung = decomposare*’? Blanchot writes of the movement outside as a kind of metamorphosis, *Decomp* of a ‘seed reading tree.’ (To read is to metamorphose some thing.) ‘Because what we find, as the interior text, is the outside which has been put upon by an interminable resifting of words and endless rot patterns ...’ Thoreau similarly links decoding and decomposition as temporal. At the same time, inverting trope (putting text into nature) only doubles trope: this is the doubling *Decomp* begins with. Can we turn trope toward entropy, via subtraction? The quest to break free of stifling tropisms is one of the oldest tropes in the books. ‘In the forest we end up resembling ourselves.’ How refreshing, then, that the comminuted fragments, all the ‘accordinbitants’ and ‘spur words,’ are not reassembled, in lieu of a decision to enact *Decomp* through collaboration, dialogue, social occasion,

to sensitively inhabit the forest of oneself: ‘Words are things we do together. Botany. Hiking. Actions and collectivities. Collections.’

What does the multiplicity of human languages look like from the outside? Are French nests as good as English nests to the Canada warbler? The operators of these books find themselves very much in a translation condition, hurled from their own tongues in the presence of foreign bodies. To paraphrase Mallarmé, to write without pen and paper, to think without sounding the diversity of bodies on earth, means that no one body can bear the miraculous stamp of meaning. ‘The tree now a form of sap. Space is inside. Translation is linguistic air.’

‘Here the word *species*, laying amid long ponderosa pine needles.’ Its one letter from *decamp* keeps *Decomp* on patrol, a shade away from nomadism. Spicer’s *Practice of the Outside* meets Ashbery’s uncommitted present. Marxist history joins the land ethic. ‘Clearly the plan is to read red into everything.’ ‘Illusory labour; bored work ... relinquishing and decomposing old ownership enclosures.’ Letters stand out, disappear, shift places, get carried away: ‘this rag of Darwin’s *Origin* in its mouth.’

Writing rots, meaning flees. ‘Graminoids’ and ‘similkameens’ mutate out of the hunt: ‘We have not seen a word since *species*.’ Yet the book is written to locate (some) meaning here. Would it make any difference to leave *Decomp* itself in the wilderness? Probably not.

Is it possible to approach Darwin – ‘a trope to tool us out of nature’s text and text’s own nature’ – from the outside? We all know that the *On the Origin of Species* is really about the disintegration of ‘species.’ A death knell to teleology that was not lost on Marx and Engels. Darwin could not have written his book outside the frameworks of taxonomy, and yet he pursued the very undoing of taxonomy. No more Adam. Or always Adam, in genealogy. An inability to name could come only at the end of civilization.

Without taxonomy, how do we identify what a book is, how to read books? ‘The forest resides somewhere between Darwin and us. It is the erasure of a book tearing itself away.’ How do we look at a photograph the forest has got to work on? Can we redefine printing as ‘becoming part of the ground’? Somehow Darwin remains perpetually optimistic about the force, the ‘vigour,’ of evolution. This book shares in that optimism.

It also shares in the specificity (that word again) of organic change as a relation to particular geographies, climates and communities, of life forms 'produced and exterminated ... [in] the mutual relation of organism to organism' (Darwin). Such specificity gives this book its structure: biogeographic differences that produce radically different 'readings' of Darwin at the same time that they eat away at our confidence regarding the neat legibility and sorting of such differences. One would then have to describe something like 'a regional guide to Darwin.'

A book, it turns out, is the most fragile thing of all. A 'ball of light in one's hand' (Pound)? The 'Orphic explanation of the earth ... transposing a fact of nature in its quivering near-disappearance' (Mallarmé). Sabina's decomposition of self by mushroom? (In shit, 'a seed comes to its own genetic expression reading itself into being.') In reversing the relation of operator to book, the work of correspondence reads us, its operators, always decomposing as we are composed. Yet 'the disintegration never disintegrates the process of disintegration' (Blanchot). Eternity is irreversible, Robert Smithson reminds us: 'Of course, if we filmed such an

experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backward, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility' ('A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey'). This irreversibility pairs poetry with evolution, another artifact of time in its spaced out and scattered processes of dispersal. As Blanchot insists, 'Poetry de-creates. It opens the way to what is not and never can be.' Smithson locates 'entropology,' a discipline of working with what's left of the topic, once our tropes have exhausted it. 'Our posture is referential,' but what happens when we lie down?

'Today's artist is beginning to perceive this process of disintegrating frameworks as a highly developed condition. Claude Lévi-Strauss has suggested we develop a new discipline called "Entropology." The artist and the critic should develop something similar. ... A film is capable of picking up the pieces ...' (Smithson, 'Art Through the Camera's Eye'). Tezcatlipoca warns the artist on neo-colonial tour, 'The camera is a portable tomb, you must remember that'; a cave opens up in language, revealing 'orgies of scale ... miniature earth-works': 'Dungeons that dropped away from the eyes

into a damp cosmos of fungus and mold' ('Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan'). Poets in the caves of western Massachusetts, discovering that 'you can never see more than you're ready to describe' (Clark Coolidge and Bernadette Mayer, *The Cave*). Eyes bring a frame, but language rots.

Colour photographs illuminate the particular life working its way through Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*: a worm, a sprout, a browsing pill bug. At the same time, photography is no less material, no less subject to irreversible disintegration, than text: 'Matter eats up light and "covers" it with a confusion of color' (Coolidge and Mayer) A book, Collis and Scott suggest, may be the proper medium of relation to the earth, in the 'with-us.' The not-so-science-fiction scenario of a scarcity of (a market in) soil makes such earth works more urgent. In any case, 'I began to run out of film, and I was getting hungry' (Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey'). No medium in the 'cascade structure' is total, as the operators of the book learn. We are worm food: 'Wolf bites in the mist.'

We stand here at the end of time. Or at the beginning of time. Reconstructing lifeways from pieces of

magazines. What reclaims us in the duff is still far off. Certain things decay more slowly. Light will paint a picture against the earth, capture pigments, peel them into effluvia. Poke a hole in the pine duff with your finger and let the blinding ray through. A body amid shrubs and grasses always rises until it doesn't. A thousand points of light in every pine needle. A mullet slumped against a car seat in the woods. Can we think decomposition without architecture? Dedifferentiation outside the non-site? The rough edge of my tooth that I grind, my tongue in it. Our vertical 'nature,' lines of reproduction. Lines of love and submission. Bearded hermits asleep in their cars. The colour of money: does money decompose? Figures of the landscape who have forgotten how to read. No way to 'judge' what is passed through the intestines of a worm. You piece it together. What gets communicated in the soil. We are nesting in these books. A worm finds its way through fibre, indifferent to the letter.

Selections from the
Bunchgrass Zone
Nicola Lake









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