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"Biological Processes as Writerly?: An Ecological Critique of DNA-based Poetry""

Ryan, John Charles

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This article examines the DNA-based biopoetry of Christian Bök in relation to its antecedents in the art-science experiments of Joe Davis, Pak Chung Wong, and Eduardo Kac. In particular, I develop an ecocritical analysis of the process of encipherment at the center of their works. Wong encoded lyrics from the song "It's a Small World After All" within the DNA of a bacterium. Similarly, Kac employs encipherment in *Genesis*, a project aiming to demonstrate that "biological processes are now writerly." In the same way, Bök's *The Xenotext: Book 1*, published in 2015, involved enciphering poetry into the genome of the bacterium *Deinococcus radiodurans.* The organism's cellular mechanisms "read" the encoded poem and produced a protein, the structure of which was then deciphered, resulting in another poem in response. In relation to these works, I ask the following: are biopoetry and the encipherment process merely conceptual and methodological experimentations, or do they reflect ecological consciousness and ethical imperative for life? Building on Foucault's idea of the discourse of nature and Benjamin's notion of a language of things, I explore how *The Xenotext*—and biopoetry more generally—reinscribe the power/knowledge relations implicit in the long-standing tropes of nature as a book, code, or cipher to be unraveled. Constructed as an inherently mute subject, nature is willed to speak purportedly on its own terms but through conspicuously human media and in inescapably androgenic terms. An ecologically directed evaluation of biopoetry ultimately affirms the indebtedness of all literary production, including biopoetry, to other-than-human lives and bodies. (Text from author's abstract)

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