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What constitutes ecopoetics is a subject of interesting and worthwhile debate, but generally speaking, ecopoetics is a term for the environmentally-driven, innovative writing that has followed our nation’s move from primarily rural to primarily urban economies and communities; that has been informed by the science and technology of the Industrial Revolution and beyond; and that has come after and in subversion of the more traditional nature poetries (in Romantic and Transcendentalist veins and otherwise). It’s the poetry that’s grown out of the environmental movement that began to take shape in the 1960s, influenced by the work of Rachel Carson and many others, a movement which exists parallel to—and, ideally, joins forces with—movements for economic, social, racial and gender justice, and informed by the postmodern framework that emphasizes these intersections. The editors of *The Ecopoetics Anthology* call it “poetry that...is shaped by...[the environmental] crisis” and that “enacts through language the manifold relationship between the human and the other-than-human world” (though I’d argue that perhaps this definition upholds the binary notion of human and Other more than is of interest to most ecopoetics practitioners).

Poet and scholar Jonathan Skinner is the person responsible for the term coming into play in the poetic sphere: although the term was first used by literary critic Joseph Meeker in the 1970s, and became part of the discourse in the 1990s through British scholar Jonathan Bate’s book *The Song of the Earth* and an essay by Lothar Honnighausen on Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, when Skinner chose *Ecopoetics* as the name for his influential literary magazine, which he has been putting out since 2001, he transformed it, by using it to describe the avant-garde work he publishes, work that is “dedicated to exploring creative-critical edges between writing (with an emphasis on poetry) and ecology (the theory and praxis of deliberate earthlings).” “Ecopoetics” has been put to good use ever since, though, as Skinner himself notes, as a term, it’s “used more than discussed.”

In a 2011 issue of the online journal *Jacket 2*, Skinner makes his own attempt as a catholic discussion of it, writing, “For some readers, ecopoetics is the making and study of pastoral poetry, or poetry of wilderness and deep ecology. Or poetry that explores the human capacity for becoming animal, as well as humanity’s ethically challenged relation to other animals. For others, it is poetry that confronts disasters and environmental injustices, including the difficulties and opportunities of urban environments. For yet others, ecopoetics is not a matter of theme, but of how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling. Or how ‘slow poetry’ can join in the same kind of push for a sustainable, regional economy that ‘eating locally’ does. Or how poetic experimentation complements scientific methods in extending a more reciprocal relation to alterity—ecopoetics as a ‘poethics.’ Or even how translation can diversify the ‘monocrop’ of a hegemonic language like English.” He goes on to say, “Rather than locate a ‘kind’ of writing as ‘ecopoetic,’ it may be more helpful to think of ecopoetics as a form of site-specificity—to shift the focus from themes to topoi, tropes and entropologies, to institutional critique of ‘green’ discourse itself, and to an array of practices converging on...the planet...that is the only home our species currently knows.”
Encompassing all of these things, ecopoetics is a concept that’s been steadily generating conversation over the last decade or so, and this conversation has led to a healthy harvest of excellent recent anthologies: *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, which seeks to revisit the notion of how black writers have documented themselves in the landscape and soil of our country throughout American history; *The Eco Language Reader*, a collection of innovative scholarly and lyric essays on ecological poetics; *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral*, non-traditional work by contemporary poets; and *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, which seeks a “capacious definition” of the term that puts traditional nature poetry in conversation with the ecocentric avant-garde. Ecopoetics has also been the subject of numerous gatherings, panels and symposiums, including the marvelous Conference on Ecopoetics at Berkeley in 2013. (A post-conference roundup of related reports, links and publications is maintained at ecopoeticsconference.blogspot.com.) In this column, I look at recent individual works of poetry that mesh with the ideas and strategies that fall under the ecopoetics rubric, refusing, rebutting or subverting some of the traditional or historic modes of writing about our habitats.

An oft-cited mantra of ecopoetics is derived from Juliana Spahr’s idea in her poem “Things of Each Possible Relation,” in which, speaking about the traditional nature poem, she says, “[E]ven when it got the birds and the plants and the animals right it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird’s habitat. And it wasn’t talking about how the bird, often a bird which had arrived recently from somewhere else, interacted with and changed the larger system of this small part of the world we live in and on.” The ecopoetic work acknowledges the vehicles, cell phone towers and other mechanized grotesqueries in the Great Outdoors, and refuses to prettify any of the landscape: it sees all of this of a piece.

Brenda Coultas has been training her poetic eyes in this way for awhile now, and her latest book, *The Tatters*, in some ways picks up where “The Bowery Project,” a series of poems included in 2003’s *A Handmade Museum* that sought to document human debris and the lives that generated it in her East Village neighborhood, left off. In the new book, Coultas states, “I want to write an elegy but without the sadness.” But *The Tatters* is sad—and also fearful (“panic travels through the blood as easily as aspirin”), indignant, and hoping against hope. Echoing Emily Dickinson’s line “hope is a thing with feathers,” feathers appear as a recurring motif, pointing toward an unforeseeable future.

The landscape Coultas documents is the stuff of nightmares: it’s a world of fracking and police brutality, of arcane computer technology rotting in barns, of Halliburton and Monsanto, of “text[ing] crystal water glass pixels to quench real thirst.” How could hope be anything but as wispy as a feather? But Coultas “puts [her] rage on top to cultivate later,” choosing for now an investigative poetics aimed at taking things apart—or looking at what is already dismantled—as a means of knowing, and perhaps learning to love, it. As an indirect response to Gary Snyder and other poets who have written that all poets ought to know the names of trees and flowers, at the beginning of the eponymous sequence poem Coultas writes,
I have lived a long time without knowing the names of the trees. Barely able to recognize a locust leaf, and yet I can recognize the sight of oak, even varnished or cobbled into a desk or plank. I have lived here, not knowing that a rock dove is a pigeon. Of my apartment, knowing only that the cockroaches are German and the rats Norwegian.

This is a poetry of a certain kind of witness: witness to the devastation of the natural world, to poverty and urban blight, to lives lost and forgotten (some of the book is dedicated to a friend of Coulta’s, the anarchist, activist, poet-journalist Brad Will). “I, ephemera, carrying my chemical burden,” the speaker declaims, but also “I, ephemera, holding the space” for uprising, honor and remembering.

The bulldozer is also next to the bird in Ed Roberson’s eighth book, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*. The poems, wildly varying in tone and form in a series of intellectual and existentially-driven sequences, offer a wise perspective, questioning the ease with which humans make war, monger hate and cause extinction. I see Roberson as engaging in the ineffable...and trying to “eff”—face? fathom? fuck?—it up. As a poet, he is drawn to Big Stuff: the space-time continuum and the galaxy and the poet’s minute, myopic place in it all. In the poem “The World, Then,” he writes,

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I don’t know what I thought
that puts the wrecks of the past back in effect.
as if in progress back in service. We think
somewhere between right and understanding
we never supposed there’d be this wrong. About
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this.

*To See the Earth* has, as its title implies, an apocalyptic flavor, emphasized formally through fragment and syntactical overlap, and a point of view that telescopes and zooms back and forth through the epic and the personal, the plain and the profound, something akin to how Jorie Graham writes. (The two are about the same age, and similarly iconoclastic in terms of the way they have orbited around, but not really in, the poetry movements and circles of their time). In the book’s third section, “Chromatic Sequences,” a meditation on the scientific nature of color ebbs and flows into a meditation on race and racism, while the fifth section, “Of the Earth,” contemplates the water and sky, trains and trees in urban Chicago and the Western desert. Hatchlings’ “egg-tooth and baby feathers” co-mingle with the “airbrake squawk of garbage truck.”

In their 21st century setting, Roberson’s poems wrestle with a technologically-infused existence on this planet: “we live not yet / caught up with ourselves,” he writes. In a late section of the poem “Topoi,” the speaker contemplates the wristwatch sitting on his window sill and its communication with a satellite in space: “let this renew an old interpretation / how we could talk / to rock, listen to plants.”

As Roberson and all the other poets discussed here know, there is no constructive way to think about aiding the planet without thinking about the impact racism, poverty, patriarchy, capitalism,
religion and other such factors have directly on the ways we use and abuse our environment. In Susan Briante’s powerful *Utopia Minus*, these connections are made plain, linking, as she does in the poem “Nail Guns in the Morning,” the stormy Dallas weather with the “fiscal year” and the “end of empire during which I am reading / the circulars stuck in my screen door.” Briante’s speaker self-identifies as coming from a suburban, working-class background from New Jersey; she is someone who, in childhood, “went to sleep [with] a window-box air-conditioner click[ing] and humm[ing].” But her view is global: in this book, the ruined “pastures of brick” in Columbia, South Carolina are equated, via a colon, to the ruined “pastures of Baghdad, Belgrade.” And in a series of “Memoranda” poems addressed to American government officials—the Surgeon General, the director of the Census—she poses provocative ethical questions: “Rwandans bury their children by the dozen,” she writes in one of these epistles, “And when a cardinal spits out his high, hard song, are we responsible to him as well?”

Like the other works discussed above, *Utopia Minus* heeds Spahr’s warning about the bird and the bulldozer: the book opens with the line “Starlings in the magnolia tree crackle, static, lightning; a helicopter floats overhead.” Throughout, Briante’s book lays bare the parts of our landscape from which we try to turn away, or occlude from poetry: the “monarch butterflies...across the Metroplex,” the man-made tollways, “wrecked housing projects,” maintenance plants, and big box chain stores that have paved over something with more potential for paradise. Only the “commerce in the black-eyed Susans” remains, to which, the poet named Susan tells us, she “feell[s] no relation.” Much of the book takes place in a Texas where the legacy of the Confederacy and the lynching and violence that followed inform the wars and hatreds of the present day. Briante chronicles depictions of casual misogyny on television, of racial profiling at TSA screenings, and “abandoned commercial use properties” in between layers of intensely felt moments of sexual and romantic love, refusing to see the one without the other, the pain and pleasure and anxiety and hope all intermingled. A scream of release during orgasm, Briante notes, can “soften” a lover’s eyes.

Although the tone of these marvelously elliptical, vulnerable poems can often seem despairing—“Sunlight through traincars stamps a barcode. / Bird-calls modem. // All the great metaphors have been taken,” Briante writes in “Short Lines”—at its heart, *Utopia Minus* has that longing for the ideal and the idyll, for interconnectedness and meaning. “We are trying to read a dirty world in structures of kinship,” declares the speaker in “Here in the Mountains”; the poem ends, “(I will call this boulder Bella Abzug.)”

Optimism, romance and anguish also inform Sarah Vap’s *Arco Iris*. An road trip book that works against the tropes of the road trip book, this is the prose poem chronicle of “traveling white lovers” who journey across South America completely aware of the problematic implications of such a voyage, and nonetheless admitting their desire for some kind of capital-E Experience of communion with other humans and with the natural world: “We want ecstatic mind we want the humming mind we want the hive mind arboreal mind rhizome mind mycelium mind.” But the speaker knows full well that the mountain, river and fossil she sees lead back to ghosts, shadows of a history of colonization and violence—“there the bishop fucking the archbishop fucking the senator”—and beyond that, her own role in the game: “there the bank account routing number there the tourist there the bus.”
The lovers at the center of this travel narrative repeatedly try—by looking, by writing, by fucking, by asking one another what they think—and fail to “join the tangle” of ghosts and find their place: their place in the political and cultural history of the countries they are visiting, their place within their relationship, their place within themselves, their place within the natural world. But they can’t, because no matter how much a tourist repeats, as Vap’s does, the mantra “We are feeling good. We aren’t hurting anyone,” she knows that to travel to another part of the world in search of epiphany is “the same old trap, cleverly set.”

With aching tenderness and charged fragment, Arco Iris makes these failures—the failures of white tourists to function against post-colonialism, and the failures of language to voice these complexities—known: central and visible. A trip down a river is fueled in part by a guide’s grandmother who “has made us sandwiches they are part of the tour package”; the speaker breaks down in tears due to a lack of good coffee in the place where coffee is grown; and the eponymous, Biblical sign of hope, the rainbow, shows up in the “oil in the water spiting out from our engine” as the tourists travel by boat. Throughout the book, the poems struggle to touch others, to love, to answer, only to fall short, sometimes inserting the phrase “does anyone want to say anything here” as a desperate bid when the poet herself cannot locate the words for the painful things she wants to say. I often think that the ethical travel poem is perhaps the most difficult thing to write in this day and age, but by emphasizing the ways in which the white tourist is neither savior nor terror—“nobody.../ whispered horror / or hallelujah as we moved by”—but something more like the “machines oiled with oil from the earth over which we glide,” Vap documents the web of impossibilities around how travel, race, money, sex and love impact the planet on which “we move along.”

Fortunately, Vap and the other poets here are not alone in dedicating their poems to these sets of concerns: there is a flourishing crop of ecopoetics writing happening right now. Time and column-space prevent me from discussing as many books as I’d like, but I want to mention a few others of note that have come to my attention.

In a sort of anti-Walden, Andrew Grace takes to the woods in his father’s lakeside cabin in Sancta, and, after his lover ultimately leaves him there, he meditates, in a series of short, untitled, somber prose poems, on loneliness, surrender and the aimless search for meaning that can also come from a human attempt to “be” in nature: “Give me a fresh elsewhere to drench in self,” he pleads with the universe, admitting “some days I want to walk until I die of exposure or the lack of it.”

Jane Mead’s latest, a trilogy entitled Money Money Money Water Water Water, is, as its title suggests, relentless, plain-spoken, and clear-eyed on the ways in which human life (and death) are as “solid and non-solid” as the air or any other element in our universe. Her spare and tough and colloquial poems feel like vital and potent tinctures from a white witch, inoculations against apathy. “The world full of tractors / Is the mystery world / The other world // Is the season,” whispers one of the brief, koan-like passages that hover on the bottom of the left hand pages.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Mead’s taut lyrics are the trans-genre sequences in Thalia Field’s Bird Lovers, Backyard, which turns the same wildly ambitious, intellectual, form-explosive approach Field employed in her earlier works to the realm of flora and
fauna. In dense, research-driven pieces, often utilizing collage and found text, Field documents the human relationship to others of our own species as well as the species we enjoy observing from afar, the species we bring in to our homes as companions and the species we systematically seek to destroy, sometimes in the guise of preserving the veneer of our own sense of beauty or order. I wish I could quote from it for you, but its complex and highly contextual method of assembly makes this challenging! Trust me: it’s a daring, brilliant work.

Also daring, brilliant and trans-genre is the final volume in Brenda Hillman’s tetralogy of the four elements, *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire*. Hillman is an exceedingly important poet-activist, who was “prepared” for her life as an political artist, as she tells us, via “Samuel Beckett &...my high school boyfriend whose drunk father yelled when we closed the door & read *The Unnamable* during the Tet offensive.” This sequence of poems burns brightly and urgently, winding its way breathlessly through fragment, parenthetical remark and wail, gathering for the bonfire everything from photographs to animal cries, from the Latin names of plants to the names of prescription drugs in an open-hearted and valiant effort to have “meaning meet material, that is, / inside the personal, / that is, for love of earth—.”

In his introduction to *The Ecopoetics Anthology*, Hillman’s husband Robert Hass writes, “trying to get into the right relationship with [the] cycles of [organic life] is probably the oldest impulse of the kinds of utterance that come down to us as poetry.” And in her prefatory note to the same anthology, editor Laura-Gray Street looks optimistically toward a future where “maybe...we won’t need a term like ecopoetry because all poetry will be inherently ecological. And maybe we won’t need environmental science departments or sustainability studies because all curricula...will have an understanding of the complexity and value of natural systems at their core.” I desire such a moment too, but, remembering the bumper sticker “I’ll be a Post-Feminist in the Post-Patriarchy,” think that I’ll have to wait to be a post-ecological poet in the world with no toxic downstream. Or in the environmental disaster-driven apocalypse. Whichever comes first. Until then, I will read, and write, poems that call attention to the interdependence of living systems on this planet.

**Books Discussed in This Column:**


*Bird Lovers, Backyard*, Thalia Field, New Directions Books, 2010


Sancta, Andrew Grace, Ahsahta Press, 2012

Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire, Brenda Hillman, Wesleyan University Press, 2013

The Tatters, Brenda Coultas, Wesleyan University Press, 2014

To See the Earth Before the End of the World, Ed Roberson, Wesleyan University Press, 2010

Utopia Minus, Susan Briante, Ahsahta Press, 2011