

Jane Sprague

Ecopoetics: Drawing on Calfskin Vellum

Rebecca Morales crafts astonishing drawings in gouache and watercolor on vellum—semitransparent, luminous sheets of specially treated calfskin. Her drawings are of botanical subjects—plants, grasses, lichens, mosses, mold, fungi, sometimes with flowerlike spores sprouting—surmounting fragmented images of long twisted hair or strange, knitted objects. (...) Morales describes her drawings as “the symbiosis between nature and humanity represented in a false union of synthetics and parasitic flora...I am conjuring small utopian visions while thinking a particular edge; a point where a new equilibrium emerges...”

In the debut issue of his journal *ecopoetics*, editor Jonathan Skinner writes “As our perception of the natural world continues to be refined (or forgotten), it seems that contemporary poetry’s complexities might actually be useful for extending and developing that perception. The natural world (which, of course, includes our own bodies) is still suffering the assault of an industrial age. . . .” (5). Later, poet Juliana Spahr responds to Skinner’s editorial statement in an essay included in her chapbook *things of each possible relation hashing against one another*:

I then realized that what I was looking for all along was in the tradition of ecopoetics—a poetics full of systemic analysis and critique that questions the divisions between nature and culture while also acknowledging that humans use up too much of the world—instead of a nature poetry (29).

Both statements indicate lineages rooted in writings as diverse as works by Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*), Walt Whitman (*Leaves of Grass*) and the “747 poems” (27) Spahr cites earlier in her essay, responding as she does, eloquently and often, through her poems, to the socio-cultural complexities endemic to life lived in the colonial-militaristic site of Hawai'i. However, in *this* essay (which aims to function less as logically argued analytical writing than as a series of linked movements or meditations on definition, cultural collisions and tentative mappings of contemporary interconnectedness, among poets and critics, which also seeks to mimic the idea of ecopoetics itself as it charts a kind of legibility, complicatedness, and ever expanding lens of contraction and collapse through which to funnel its musings) I hope to challenge and likewise complicate / critique ideas of ecopoetics as genre. I resist ecopoetics. And definitions of ecopoetics. I resist it as a neat category into which one might insert my own work, like some car slipping into its slot on the freeway. It’s important here to mention gas, petrol, “birth of the crude.” To work toward a poetics of relation in a consciously ecological way.

little oceans everywhere

economies of loss
cartographies of discontent

map our distance

a series of narrows / fully seamed gaps

lapse into--
long-distance reclamation projects

plumed distance / plumb depths
a new kind of dolphin depth charge

dropping a line
pulling up hosts / hostiles / a bigger anchor unwinds

coming up wet
down under

Let it be borne in mind how infinitely fitting and complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life. —Charles Darwin

the view from the sea / the constant motion of claiming, collecting, changing and taking / the calmness of bays and the greenness of land caused by the freshness of things growing into / the arrival to someplace else / the arrival to someplace differently —Juliana Spahr

In his essay, *On Natural Selection*, Charles Darwin writes of the interconnectedness of organisms in nature and how all organic beings in the natural world are “close fitting”—not just among members of an individual organism’s community—but the interdependence of all creatures within a given eco or “natural” (nature-al) system (20). For instance, in an oceanic context evidence of healthy coral reefs is first borne out by the presence of large predators: sharks; in their absence, scientists determine that the entire ecosystem is under pressure, duress. Darwin speaks to our *mutual* interconnectedness and dependence while also mapping mimicry at the level of actual natural systems in which humans are also embedded: among them fractal geometry (Mandelbrot); the Fibonacci sequence (Spahr) and more. At the same time, Darwin foregrounds his argument early in *On Natural Selection* by eliding both climate change and immigration, issues as salient for today’s reader as they would have been for audiences circa 1859. Darwin makes a powerful rhetorical move by situating his argument in a *human animal* context: we are only, after all, large primates, as social as we are skilled with tools. One fundamental truism of the collective history of human beings has been our inclination toward movement, migration, intermingling, interpenetration: to be among. This been as essential to the cultivation of our DNA as it has been for dominating natural systems of plants and animals and subjugating other human beings (to eat the flesh of another is the ultimate monstrosity [Montaigne]; genocide, murder and the social, psychological and physical domination of other human creatures: Abu Ghraib; Rwanda; Germany; Kosovo; Armenia; [...]; Kafka’s “transformed” monster—Gregor-vermin-Samsa; Kafka’s sundered *ungeheure*: the household, the home). If we are interconnected thus, what does it mean to be human *now*? In our current historical moment? What does it mean (now) to

be a human, among not just many of our own species but among the increasingly fractured natural world we inhabit? And more so, how might ecopoetics force a certain kind of torque on language, on thinking, for which our current human crisis might be strangely suited?

<ping>

<ping>

wait time

wait time

school of silent pupil fish

school of silent well paid them

*

In the space of this essay-as-assemblage, I hope to attempt a spontaneous survey of writers whose work I find engaging various interpretations of ecopoetics as such and also those whose work might seem to fall outside of a given working understanding of the concept of an ecologically informed poetics as praxis.

intimate anachronist, intentional

root ganglia stop-gap

experiments of thought and dissolution

thinking processes

ground down tight

to the bone

dust

*

Part of the concern with ‘ecopoetics’ itself (as a genre) is a kind of tendency toward categorization or school/ing and the active work to resist such potentially limiting / stultifying labels. Experimental / innovative / *transgressive* poetics actively situate themselves against the limits of label—and part of the constraint or frustration with labels themselves is that they amount to more branding: Kellogg’s; Corn Flakes; Staples; Apple; all American multinational corporations. Perhaps to distill an understanding of ecopoetics, ecopoetries, would it then be all that which consciously points a line toward the local and also the global? Simultaneously? Because then we end up much deeper in the thick of it, closer to a clear kind of *dire lyric*—a lyric which takes as its focus lamentation (Juliana Spahr; Brenda Coultas); a *dire lyric* which takes as its work the reclamation project of untold narratives, though not in any strictly narrative sense in re. fictions and the endemic conceits of plot. Harryette Mullen’s UC Press book *Sleeping With the Dictionary* takes as its focus the city of Los Angeles and the politics of the polyglot, the poetics of erasures, the constant “re-inscription of whiteness” which occurs

annually, (daily) at every level of human experience in what is the world's fifth largest economy: the state of California and, more closely, it's largest city: Los Angeles.

Bilingual Instructions

Californians say No
to bilingual instructions in schools

Californians say No
to bilingual instructions on ballots

Californians say Yes
to bilingual instructions on curbside waste receptacles:

Coloque el recipiente con las flechas hacia la calle
Place container with arrow facing street

No ruede el recipiente con la tapa abierta
Do not tilt or roll container with lid open

Recortes de jardin solamente
Yard clippings only

Natural Anguish

Every anguish is arbitrary but no one is neuter. Bulldozer can knock down dikes. Why a ragged bull don't demolish the big house? The fired cook was deranged. On the way back was when I saw red I thought ouch. Son when I think colored someone bleeds. The agency tapping my telephone heard my pen drop. Now I'm walking out of pink ink. We give microphones to the voiceless to amplify their silence. The complete musician could play any portion of the legacy of the instrument. My ebony's under the ocean. Please bring back my bone (sic) to me. Once was illegal for me to testify. Now all us do is testify. We's all prisoners of our own natural anguish. It's the rickety rickshaw that will drive us to the brink.

How, pray tell, is *this* ecopoetics? Well, it's not. If we're resisting ideas of labeling and brand stamping. Ideas and ideation of schools and schooling. Mullen's poetry is, however, an excellent example of my reworking, reimagining of ecopoetics as that which Skinner explores in his Editor's Comment (*ecopoetics*, no.1): "(...) a site open to the contradictions such work often willingly engages and embodies. *ecopoetics* would ideally function as an edge (as in edge of the meadow, or shore, rather than leading edge) where different disciplines can meet and complicate one another" (6). To this I would add as edge, or edge dwellers, edge-mongerers, the populations eking out their livings at the edge of such fractured gaps opened by humans, the fractured gaps of Mullen's poethical

writings in *Sleeping With the Dictionary*—the intentionally “lost” (submerged, sundered, sunk) histories of the hundreds of thousands (millions?) of Africans who perished during the Middle Passage; the hundreds of thousands of millions of Latino/Latina/Mexica/Mexicano/Chicano/Chicana/South and Central American residents and primarily Spanish speaking populations of Southern California where Mullen lives, teaches, writes, rides public transportation: the extreme global village, come home.

the slow ching- ching
pennies through finger

circadian pelican slip

do not eat WHITE CROAKER

toxin to wetland to needle to female
doggie plush tongue

**

Part of the brilliance of this book is that Mullen engages various ideas of “the local” (as problematic as I know that term can be) to expand her smart critique of and riffs on the hegemony of racism and language use in the United States as she links to global histories of African American experience—experiences largely *less written* into / about than what canonical literature has historically allowed. Poems from this collection such as “Exploring the Dark Content”, “Mantra for a Classless Society, or Mr. Roget’s Neighborhood”, “Souvenir from Anywhere”, “We Are Not Responsible” and many others map this urban imagining of eco-poetics as intrinsically tied to the human organism and the failure of systems, the absurdity of our willingness to engage in certain non-Emancipation Proclamations and the insistent (and institutionally determined) entrenched state of the English language itself as part of parody, patriarchy, culture and various systems of silencing through which Mullen’s poetry is cuttingly and (often, hilariously) refracted.

I’m lacking the emotional
supra-engine

eering

lacking the necessary
emotional architecture

**

Poet Marcella Durand has written “A city may seem on its surface to be a grotesque and fascinating spasm of construction and interaction, a critical mass reached by an enormous gathering of humanity, maintained through an invisible web of mutual cooperation and mutual hostility” (“Introduction.” (*the invisible city*). New York: Erato Press, 2001).

From her deft apprehension of the complexities pursuant to the city as site, as source, we can turn our attention to the writings of poets Kaia Sand and Bruna Mori both of whom (whether consciously or not) use the Situationist-inspired tactic of the *dérive* as an adroit eco-poetical tool for focusing our readerly attention around the very grotesqueries and fascinations Durand implies in her introduction to the collection (*the invisible city*), edited (ironically) out of the twin port cities of New York and New Orleans—before the attempted annihilation of the financial center of one and the erasure by natural disaster and governmental oversight/neglect/bungling of the other. “All cities are nothing but reflective; they reflect the surrounding universe back at and into their very hearts” (Durand). What all three women achieve, perhaps, by invoking the city as central for either their poetics or the terrain of particular collections (Mori’s first published full-length collection of poems is titled *Dérive*; Sand’s book *interval* uses cities and aspects of psychogeography in various ways useful and instructive within this loose working rubric of reading eco-poetics as less-pastoral driven (building on Spahr’s description of “nature poetry” and all its particular and deeply familiar limitations) as opposed to the urban center as integral for remaining, re-understanding (reintegrating?) our humanness. Guy Debord and his on-again/off-again (or exiled, as the case may be) cohort the Situationist International initially introduced the *dérive* itself (“drift”) as an anti-capitalistic (and, hence, anti-bourgeoisie and the cultural values of the bourgeois class) attempt to use the geography of the city itself to “[wander] through urban space to (...) [explore] forms of life radically beyond the capitalist work ethic (...)” in the spirit / pursuit of “collective play” (“Architecture and Play”; *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*). Brenda Coultas’ book *A Handmade Museum* also works in this tradition using Jane Jacobs’ book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* as its philosophical-theoretical locus for the poem “The Bowery Project,” in particular. So the intersections of landscape architecture, art-making, agit-prop socio-cultural gangsterism and the lineages of avant garde poetics intersect, build upon, catalogue, complement and contradict (contra-invent) one another. The misogynistic impulses behind much of Debord’s work especially in relation to the *dérive* have been written about at length, elsewhere. However, it’s worth mentioning in this article because part of what is so compelling about the work of Mori in particular (as well as the work of Lisa Robertson, especially her collection *Office for Soft Architecture* a “practical guide for the navigation and appreciation of contemporary cities.”) is that she subverts the too easy and clichéd organization of Debord’s imagining of the city as hetero-normatively erotic for the purposes of exploration, seduction, penetration and plunder, a kind of sexualizing of physical space which too obviously echoed fantasies of virginal female spaces as so much more territory for colonizing, protecting, “saving” all for the greater purpose of a kind of sacrilegious unholy art-fucking. From Mori’s 2006 Meritage Press book, *Dérive*:

Marking

Rhythms before me are paths drawn from the ocean, the space moving with us and through us, architects long gone. This teasing of your morose clowns. You send me reeling with your cacophonous labor, heaving trestles of human rhizome—not a centering but an entering into. Exploring you as flaneur, but you are flaneur, pressing me with your “This is not a thru street” and voluptuous engagements. To walk a straight path here is an impossibility. How to sidestep the canonic Krishna dance and Puerto Rican boys calling, “Cheena,” “Mamacita,” and “God bless you.”

Mori’s dérives inform and become her poems. Her ecotopia is a series of random or linked navigations of three of the boroughs of New York: Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens. Not unconcerned with ecology in a strictly environmentalist’s visions, but not over/pre-determined by it, either. What Mori articulates in this book reinscribes the vision Durand lays out for us as her poems probe explorations of a city at moments “When the house of language returns / and the words, no guarantee, speak / fierce tongues have solitary women / who sing to traverse.” And asks the question: “Have we arrived disabling a perfect silence? / If it exists.” Mori’s books grapples with the improbable collisions endemic to urban life in ways which correspond to the work of Brenda Coultas and others in my (eco)poetical reading of these works.

The Port of Los Angeles
emptied of all attachment
histories of colonies

life goes on here
it’s raining
quiet

—

Juliana’s Spahr’s work is significant in this thinking through of ecopoetics as her work is consistently remarkable for its capacity to draw more and more and now even more in—into the space of the poem, this dire lyric I’ve begun to assert. Rewriting lyric. Reworking it. Retooling, reclaiming, revamping. The lyric of lament and the lamentation of list. As writing is thinking. Spahr’s poems enact a global muscular reach but not with the corporate brand-stamping, not with industry’s greed though often glancing sidelong and letting us follow; industry’s glimpse. From her introduction to *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (UC Press, 2005):

The constant attention to difference that so defines the politics of Hawai’i, the disconnection that Hawai’i claims at moments with the continental United States, felt suddenly unhelpful. I felt I had to think about what I was connected with, and what I was complicit with, as I lived off the fat of the military-industrial complex

on a small island. I had to think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all those things geographically.

She goes on to write about a kind of reconnection with the use of the lyric form itself in her poetry which, in this collection, is full of lament, repetition, an ode-like sadness or melancholy evocative of Darwin's writings about the interconnectedness of species and also the modifications made upon certain species made by (and expressly *for*) the purpose/s of "man." Spahr also engages her regular (trademark? I wince at that distinction but it is one of the signature aspects of her work...) use of a pluralistic first-person pronoun: her intentionally dilated and therefore utterly inclusive use of "we":

When I speak of the green parrots I speak of yous and me,
beloveds, and our roosts are at the bottom of the crater once called
Lē'ahi, now called Diamond Head, and I speak of those who
encourage us to think of them as roosting with us, Mariah Carey,
Jermaine Dupri (...)

and before that prose stanza:

I speak of grandsons of Haitian slaves and what it means
to be French.

I speak of global jihad, radical clerics, giant planets, Jupiter, stars'
gas and dust, gravitational accretion, fluid dynamics, protoplanetary
evolution, the unstoppable global spread of AIDS.

polar sun iconic bear melt
bright blue bold hull

shoving out petrol: birth of the crude

hemmed in liquid lancet
just in case a spill

a boom a float a rubber--just in case
maybe holder catcher thing

impossible claws tooth metal
all in all / all and all to China
my P.R.C.

Finally, at another end of this constellation of "dire lyrics" and post-pastoral urban ecotopia impulse writings I place the work of a writer whose poetry I feel is sort of perpetually underwritten about: Kaia Sand.

sweet skipper of every cheap rum
Target dresses

cents and cents and mattering
in the way of accumulation / discard

in the way of slow-towing petroleum coke down the coast (to MEXICO)
can you feel the tether thicken

capital umbilicus
bunched wisdom

a sea lion followed us out
reflected on purpose

pushed the white off the page

In her 2004 Edge Press book, *interval*, Kaia Sand is up to things wondrous and strange—expansive, yet framed in a kind of light of “the local” which unifies various aspects of all three writers whose work I’ve gathered into this Forum for an intentional examination of various uses of ecopoetics as that which is not strictly “nature writing” and also as that which might be understood to echo evoke and otherwise engage a feminist writing practice (though the generic brand consumer in me worries about slapping yet another [not to mention the “F” word!] onto the work of these women, nevertheless, there it is. So much for reclamation projects of many kinds...). From “progeny”:

an aerial view reveals
indelible scores of organisms

colonizing their relations
as skeletons break along edges

along scored edges

.....

a body like a fibula, like something
to carry home

the croon of forestry seductive
as an upstream salmon

some rhythm to this western
language which you may speak

so much to say *yes*

Sand's work steps beyond merely the ecological rendering of disparate and plundered geographies as her work fuses aspects of the body (citizen, citizen...), the body politic, the global and the local concern into one dire lyric as I've begun to trace in this article. Sand's work reminds us, insistently, gently, "it is now we must begin / to gather, it is now, this future / no future, this" ("suppose the future").

CITIZEN JANE

ownership or loss
and "no bordered sense of that"
I do not know how we were to be (we) unbordered

there is always a border
your line in the sand
keep scratching—here—
let me move it *here*

cross over
tip
reach
berth
bunk
bunker
low-down
tether
nether
ships

language the blowhole
starts here
start stopping
heck of a dive and mast under
forwheel
every mizzen mild day
crow's nest to sea shore
cowrie shell commerce
conversations of necks
iron to jugular / such dead heavy load
bear down these century
while some pure poet's
pure reason
leaves the whole world

away

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*Thanks to Mark Nowak for his articulation of “reinscribing [our] whiteness.” (UCLA, 2005)