

Placing Displacement: Ecology, Poetry and Race

"It is my view that this road will not only destroy our lives on CowPasture, but is being cut through the pasture *simply because the pasture is there to be cut thru.*"

--Kamau Brathwaite, response to a letter to the editor by Michael Atkins, *The Nation Newspaper*, Bridgetown, Barbados, June 8, 2005

This talk was delivered at "Is Ground as to Figure as Ambience is to Body? Ec(h)opoetics of the Disfigured Landscape," for Advancing Feminist Poetics & Activism on September 25, 2009, The CUNY Graduate Center.

While poets such as Jack Collom, Bernadette Mayer, Julie Patton, Tina Darragh, Ed Roberson and others have been investigating questions of ecology in their poetry for years, in the fields of experimental poetics, the *practice* of doing so had not quite congealed enough to distinguish as a "movement" until relatively recently. In 2001, Jonathan Skinner founded the journal *ecopoetics*, and with the concurrent growing awareness of global warming, many poets began to investigate the potential intersections between innovative poetry and the myriad practices and philosophies of the ecological movement.

Now, eight years since, there has been an explosion of thought on the subject(s). HOW(2) published a special issue on women and ecology last year, and Nightboat Books is soon publishing an anthology of essays, *The Ecolanguage Reader*, by poets on *ecopoetics*. Panels and even conferences are convening with ecological poetry as the topic. But, as a self-proclaimed "veteran" on the scene (I gave a talk on ecology and poetry at Small Press Traffic way back in 2002¹), I'd like to discuss a gap in the discourse—the interactions between *race*, ecology and poetry.

There are a few books on or ancillary to the issues of race and ecology, such as *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*², and Camille T. Dungy's new anthology,

¹ "The Ecology of Poetry," delivered at Small Press Traffic in San Francisco, CA, on September 21, 2002, as part of its "New Experiments" series curated by Elizabeth Treadwell. Subsequently published in *ecopoetics* (Fall 2002) and a revised version in 26 (2004). An even more revised version is forthcoming in the

² *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, edited by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, South End Press, 2007

*Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*³ (notice, she does not use the term “ecopoetics”). And essayists/journalists such as Rebecca Solnit and Mike Davis have done invaluable independent work uncovering racism in environmentalism⁴. The surrounding tragedy of Katrina brought the links between race and ecological disaster to some sort of public consciousness (even though follow up has been tragically lacking). And even the departure of Van Jones⁵ from the White House has somewhat brought to view the differences between the environmental justice movement, which focuses on local issues such as toxic contamination of low-income communities, and the global environmental movement, which, for example, focuses on issues like global warming. But as ecopoetics continues to grow and look at itself and aggregate into some sort of identifiable something (and I’m not saying I full-heartedly agree with this process), it’s time to start talking about how race can figure into ecopoetics—for many reasons.

First, folded into the environmental movement itself *is* racism, inherent in its most popular tropes. For instance, take the binaries of nature vs. civilization, urban vs. wilderness—binaries that have racism encoded within them. In summer 2008, while on a panel, I questioned the use of the word “wilderness” in poetics to describe a certain freedom of thought and creativity unimpeded by *others*. I quickly found myself in a heated argument where I was told that inner-city children were doomed, per the theories of Richard Louv⁶, to a dim existence of cheated potential because of their lack of access to wide-open spaces. Well, what inner-city children are we talking about here? And do I need to point out that it was similar thinking that led to housing projects, originally meant to provide “light and air” to the poor, but instead disrupting and often destroying economically, socially and physically local communities? But even more I was surprised by the apparent continued devotion to the concept of “wilderness,” when it’s questionable whether wilderness ever existed—as so-called “wild” spaces in the Americas and Africa and Polynesia were already inhabited by humans (and thus the corollary concept of the “wild man”). I see the urge to escape to “wilderness” as in part an urge to escape from a perceived other. Solnit

³ Published by University of Georgia Press, 2009

⁴ Try reading Mike Davis’s *The Ecology of Fear*, Vintage, 1999; and Rebecca Solnit’s collection of essays, *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics*, University of California Press, 2008

⁵ Founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, author of *The Green Collar Economy* and advocate for “green jobs,” among other accomplishments. “Encouraged” to resign as special advisor for green jobs at the White House Council for Environmental Quality—target of Glenn Beck.

⁶ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Algonquin Books, 2008

has pointed out how the view of nature as pristine garden has exclusion at its core.⁷ Immigration restrictions and population control are two issues within the ecological movement that unveil a deep strain of fencing out—one such anti-immigration group attempted a takeover of the Sierra Club not so long ago⁸. But the language of the garden/ wilderness persists in poetic dialog. Juliana Spahr famously questioned the bird vs. the bulldozer⁹. But now are questions of who gets to live where? Where is place within ecology? Where is place within language and language within place? And where is race within place within language within ecology?

I believe that where we are, how we are allowed to live, is determined by the politics of the land—the big politics and the little politics. And it varies depending on where you're located. I'm very interested in the landscape in general as the site of living, of a place created out of lives, and those lives having a kind of politics and a kind of being that is consciously and unconsciously shaped. Decisions are made that allow us to do certain things that give us certain freedoms and “unfreedoms.”

--Claudia Rankine¹⁰

Here is an excerpt from Tonya Foster's poem-piece, “The Math of Chaos: Pay Attention to Where You At/From”:

Geography can be transformative—the way a bullet to the body can be transformed from just damaging metal by the stage or the screen or the music video into the hero's talisman, the way proximity to southern/northern/eastern/western boundaries of a neighborhood/town/city/state/country/axis can train the day-to-day tongue in the how of tell and say, of do; the way an “I” is trained and marked up by what surrounds and presses forward and against it.

⁷ Again, see *Storming the Gates of Paradise*

⁸ <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0220/p01s04-ussc.html>

⁹ Spahr, “Anti-Colonial Poetry” (<http://people.mills.edu/jspahr/anticolonial.htm>). Also see “Notes Toward an Ecopoetics: Revising the Sublime and Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*” by Christopher Arigo, How(2),

http://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/essays/arigo.html

¹⁰ Interview on poets.org

http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/21017?utm_source=poetsupdate_091609&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=content&utm_content=rankine_interview

Writers such as Rankine, Foster, Will Alexander, Julie Patton, Kamau Brathwaite, C.S. Giscome, and others in their work ask, as Foster asks, how to read/write a poem as a site/sight of encounters between material and conceptual geographies, or even how to travel through these geographies, as Alexander so radically does in his transmigrations between continents, oceans, species, planets, beings. But how can a poet of color take part in an ecological movement, be part of an ecology, be an *ecopoet*, when place is so often turned into displace, diaspora, disaster? Poet Ravi Shankar was pulled over by cops, denied a lawyer and a phone call, held in jail for 3 days, in July 2009—for an unpaid speeding ticket.¹¹ Both Julie Patton and Kamau Brathwaite have been fighting to stay in their homes, their places, the last several years—Julie her apartment in the East Village and Brathwaite’s land in Cow Pasture/Cow Pastor, for which he had visions as “the sharing xample of my life as poet & teacher & cultural activist.”¹² Eric Priestley has also left the U.S.A. altogether, after for his place in L.A., a place for which, like Brathwaite, he had visions of being a center for art and visions and poetry. Now, Eric Priestley has relocated, re-placed to China.¹³ For poets of color, questions of ecology and place can be particularly urgent, concrete, immediate. Foster writes into New Orleans, its language, how language shaped her, how environs shaped her, where her home is: she lives in NYC now, but her “home” is irretrievably altered.

Although I wasn’t born there (my relatives, on occasion, taunt me with “Yankee,” though, of course, I have never and would never taunt them with “Confederates”), home is N’Awlins—that dike-enclosed fabrication caught among the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico, and Lake Pontchartrain, three tongues which dictate the wills and ways of the city.

In a 2006 *Nation* article, titled “Who Is Killing New Orleans?” Mike Davis identifies the racism behind the plans to “rebuild” (or unbuild) New Orleans¹⁴. New Orleans was being redrawn according to the fantasy of the purified civic space. Why after all would the previous residents *want* to return home to what

¹¹ “Old Speeding Ticket Lands Poet in Jail,” by Ravi Shankar, http://www.statesman.com/opinion/content/editorial/stories/2009/08/04/0804shankar_edit.html

¹² Letter to the Editor, *The Nation Newspaper*, Bridgetown, Barbados, June 8, 2005, <http://tomraworth.com/kamatk.pdf>

¹³ To learn more, watch Eric Priestly’s interview series, “The Bohemian” on youtube.com, or see him at Beyond Baroque, <http://www.poetry.la/page137.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060410/davis>

white populations saw as crime-ridden, miserable lives?¹⁵ And to ecologists who question why populations of color would desire to return to low-lying areas vulnerable to future flooding, Foster's work responds, because the deep *human* history of these areas are *worth it*. The ecology of the 9th ward was built for generations around complex histories — and this is an ecology that should be just as much worth it (or more) as protecting Manhattan's Wall Street. Ed Roberson's *City Eclogues* winds together human and civic and spatial histories: the human *makes* the space thru accumulated history.¹⁶ Christopher Arigo writes that "ethnopoetics must necessarily be included in a complete ecopoetics, as humans are an integral part of the ecology."¹⁷ So how is language made home within ecology when location is forcibly dislocated? When the bridge out is closed, and home is made uninhabitable? "I recognize the longing to make a home home away from home and the impossibility for so many of us to be able to call our homes home any longer," says M. NourbeSE Philips in a letter to Brathwaite, "How do we, the flotsam and jetsam of 500 years of 'dis/place hard, oui' own what our erstwhile masters never intended us to own?"¹⁸

More and more questions in these intricate and difficult spaces between race, ecology and poetry: what *is* place in the United States? Is it dominion? Where does wilderness turn into garden turn into plantation? Who is kept out and who gets in? Who works the land? Who is the gardener? In *Prairie Style*, C.S. Giscome inserts language into the unyielding spaces of the Great Plains, where farming failed and genocide mostly succeeded. These spaces that function as sort of mental air-conditioning for the invented American identity are culturally fabricated, even as ecological problems rumble below, like mining rights and groundwater extraction. Davis discusses in *The Ecology of Fear* how L.A. exurbanites pushing into the California wilderness now use the language used to describe inner-city gang crime to describe cougars. Wildlife is equated with "other" with exotic with sex with race. Wilderness is open access, open to exploitation, desecration/ adventure, exploration. It's open to naming, to encounter, to specialization, to development. Yambo Ouologuem explodes the nature/race languages used toward Africa, the "ripe fruits," the bestiality, the darkness.¹⁹ Where one is not supposed to be. It's a shock to encounter the black

¹⁵ As Barbara Bush famously said, "What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them."

¹⁶ Atelos, 2006

¹⁷ Also see "Notes Toward an Ecopoetics"

¹⁸ <http://tomraworth.com/nourbeSe.html>

¹⁹ "The Thousand and One Bibles of Sex," *The Yambo Ouologuem Reader*, Africa World Press, 2008
<http://www.twincitiesbookfestival.net/online/2009summer/ouologuem.shtml>

doctor who shows up at the door of the *Little House on the Prairie*. A fantasy about ecology is of balance, of things being where they are *supposed* to be, in their proper place. Invasive aliens shouldn't hitch rides on airplane wheels (nor should they be brought over by homesick Europeans). Jonathan Skinner discusses so-called invasive "alien" species and how they function in the "Third Landscape," i.e., an "acutely compromised situation," according to Gilles Clément.²⁰ And again, we can see the bind the U.S. is in: what is worse, native species or invasive alien? Eradicate the passenger pigeon, bring on the Shakespearean starling.

Ecology is race is place is displace is location is language. As corporeal poet writes so corporeal poet is displaced, arrested, evicted and ecopoetics intersects between exterior and interior world in visceral and urgent way. I'll end with Kamau Brathwaite, writing about Cow Pastor:

The dream the vision was to in-gather the scatta archives (Ja & NYC) here, try heal them and from this wound of miracle, set up a BUSSA CENTRE for us all - enough peace & space & beauty surpassing any other in the world - in a small sacred bless - to build a place to live to love, a place for the LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA, a conference room, performance outdoor places, chalets for writers, artists - that kind of possible dream - because we had the dream we had the space we had the means - destroyed by my own Govt - w/out DISCUSSION - and digging us down and STRANGLING the holy past & constellation flute & future of this place - the egrets gone because the cattle gone. the woo doves mourn. I itch from deconstruction cement dust

I cannot even die here now. no strength to even burn myself upon this pasture as I want to do. As I still may. Because my love, whe else is there to go, to try to build again at 75? tho I not beggin for your sympathy - tho that good too - I askin you to LISSEN . one mo Emmerton. xcep unlike the Mighty Gabby song which sing & say far more than any prose I prose can say, me na give up. me nvva will accept unrighteousness, If this was SandlyLane wd we be treated so? again today the tractors wheel an thump. I can't accept to so unfairly go

²⁰ "Thoughts on Things: Poetics of the Third Landscape," forthcoming in *The Ecolanguage Reader*, Nightboat Books.

p/s I'm being told that all this is too late - that time & the tide has pass me by - not enuff effort too late! if that be so, let me then at least hope that you will allow at least my faint words - faintly heard now on the pasture - be at least a verbal memorial to mark the graveyard of this place²¹

²¹ <http://tomraworth.com/wordpress/>

Dividing the plane

envelopes everywhere addressed and brought over land or ocean or rain
papery and described as such in words sought and en route to “burning”
sensation then thought and color in between descriptive or compositional
otherwise, where pleasure? a landscape of paper, carved with pen

snow, impediment a movie about bugs shows the disaster of rain—leaf
or soil refuge destroyed in seconds, water bursts upon web or nest
the ten-foot mark on a wall lifts all boats and knick-knacks so goes plumbing
when technology floods, does not easily recover

corrosion results and easy analysis with color-coded
paper paper again defeats water, then fire over paper rock
ice out of rock water caught in pouring moment oh, its
various forms to read the envelopes and eventualities a

landscape of to describe/to compose and “attack” a Turner
and space aliens/pterodactyls spewing over placid horizon
hordes divide the line scatter color, replace description with
replicates and predators

vs. “were” compassionate, otherwise what’s pleasure?
a landscape sculpted into valleys, gullies, the roots of mountains
angry landscape scar erosion silt cadmium cobalt malachite
from basque to graduate theory and close imaginary mineral friend

descriptive or compositional warmth found nowhere or a silence
stomach mysterious languages origins in mountain roots passing underneath
a peak in quiet movement forward: 14,000 feet and then some above
as we move through the tunnel did I say silently or quietly?

steam erases words on window as tunnel eases forward
or two borers meet under a channel and shake rotating timbrels
a frisson of air cracks the depressurization tank
one fang greets the herbivore

description lacks of mountain roots documentary omits the document
assumptions no wants desire the chemical composition and caves
full of inert neon gas if when borer passes fiery colors like “rainbow”
but even more so never forgive the “shooter”

Pastoral 2

I repeat myself very well then I repeat myself and
replant myself very well then I replant and very well I
leaf and twig and branch and replanted I garden
and salad and water pipes and aim toward water
and power line and insidious tendril test, friend or foe?
freeze or fry? fried or foam? chemicals comprise comrade
and signal outlines appreciated I replant and send tendril
tenderly a curvaceous greenery tip an attempted implant
a hair a strand appreciate until swarming appreciated
are you a leaf a twig a branch a trunk a tree a vegetation
wooden artery central mid torso sketched and executed
and wind and no and wind and no and wind and wind arriving
a gust a sigh are you friend or foe of aluminum greenery
of aluminum twig of aluminum salad of insidious tendril
aluminum of curvaceous aluminum greenery invasive friend
or of strand appreciate power aluminum garden branch torso?
Ally or comrade? Alloy or concern? Assay or debt?

Of debt

of wind of deeper of depth of compounded of extravagance
luxury practicum torso appreciate tendril percentage gold
repeated piping bowl I brick greenery tip dollar percentage
oil outline tendril curvaceous gold foe wind problem solution
vegetation paralysis subliminal sublime gold foe problem wind
gold foe problem wind alloy concern aluminum nature feed
how to concern feed aluminum gold problem? how to assay
debt feed piping bowl and spread gold how to paper thin
gold and spread and gold and blow life into gold and fill
bowl invasive piping debt thief aluminum project proposal metals?

gold life capital practical curvaceous tendril fill or wind

wind or fill practical capital curvaceous tender life gold

Proponents of the rotating drum have thought...

Turns are becoming shorter and the drum should rotate faster.

Distance increases; the coil of the rotating drum is empty.

Having become the rotating coil, the ballast of the rotating drum holds the line.

Centrifugal brake drum turning regulates the speed of the coil's rotation and prevents speeding faster.

The rotating drum is specific to small diameter rings.

The rotating drum is specific to its competition.

The rotating drum is not a surfcast or throwing back.

The drum is rotating generator wigs.

The drum is not turning fast enough.

At the point of the rotating drum, guide wire with two fingers on the other hand to distribute it over the coil not to make a wig but to launch next.

A third hand holds the rotating drum or the cane.

It is impossible to see the weight of the rotating drum.

When the rotating drum doesn't turn over the line drawn at the end of the launch.

When the coil continues to place the wig, who needs to disentangle the glimmer of the lamp before the rewind?

the shaking frame

ending on instead detritus, opposite of what K wrote
as “manufactured epiphany”—walked upon, a small foot
printed, a physics of imprint. Glimpse rain and then glimpse
prepare. Shelves read in their titles like a long wooden sentence.
It doesn't add up; it adds up and becomes as though unto a stairway
to another room of chairs and tables. A small room where everything
isn't so connected—

instead, random, or the appearance of random, as the interaction
of multiplicity creates—

no, there is no possibility of reduction—

to paraphrase the force of variable energies and matter colliding—
color inextricable, red is too right there. Need an uncorrection, or some way to
unsee. The future of spacetime if they still connect (it still connects?) nothing else
knows me but a light that however lights a moment a face. I may not be
known by none other but that presence *tu* intimate and becoming familiar

What time will spacetime be in another hour when I go back
and pick up and cook and bathe and read three stories and tuck in
and stroke head and give sip of water and sit within view, talking
a little yet not so much as to promote wakefulness but to be there,
just be there, just be, be, a mostly quiet presence and hopefully
protective, or at least the sense

one won't disappear into a hole or turn into a statue.
A complete guide to the laws of the universe. Another long one.
Then night. Then night. He notices rain and darkness.

And sunny no rain why? Home makes him happy and
school makes him happy. We walk from one to the other
and back and my feet are wheels and I drowse while walking.
We are migratory and cross vast distances under trees
shifting colors, each street lined with trees is a tunnel
from which we emerge, the city goes on and on, and
landmarks I greet each day in strange familiarity like I know
the building that lights up and fades as clouds obscure sun.
It glimmers fiercely, chrome torching, a shape in color.
As color is sometimes known and even describable.

A form in reading, a shape of words, doors and
windows and what should be the same is different
through accumulation, and in this animate inanimation
are people: my companions at the wooden tables,
one laughs and the other sleeps and leans forward

we are two, a pair, and four eyes, four ears, digits
and tendons and displacement at night stroke head and wait, bear
is wrapped like a burrito and cave made out of blankets and bear
shakes free, trains, tiny cars, blankets hung neatly, basket
of socks, tiger puzzle. Culmination of grammar expresses
interior ecstatic communion—do self by self on own alone

Orion stays low in the sky and if we reside within his spur, still a long
way from belt and here to there.

Orion's hand is missing.

Apollinaire's hand is missing, and now so are the stars.

A morning had occurred, and the words stayed.

his face presents itself as apart from his body
encircled often and technology, ports to depart
and open ocean distraction to water hoping
wave takes body where landforms begin
crucible of land crux of subsumption
sometimes ugly and at such times
forming and already resident
within the day, within the range takes shape

I hope we will not be received as such when time
receives us in future as time happens back to water, face
to turn about *tu* intimate and yet greeted body intersectional

carried, carry—*carry!* Flux of dependent and independent, do
self, by self learning self

To turn to yell, questing voice, sound will carry—sleep? Sleep?
A sonar uninterested in the shape of others, but instead interior.
What drives it is pox, explosive, carbon,
spinning
 an ur-rotation

Tu tu intimate space occurs from here *to* there, within which
small being as skin-to-skin of which where *with*
– with you, I with – them, of, small, from, configured
complex being, configured, mixed and made, how to *say to*
how to glimpse tiny distances as in building to street, blankie
to sleep, pinky to lips, nails to fingers, eyes, mouth, scale
induces smallness

embraceable finity
within circumference of arm
perspective of thumb to finger
and spandrels of spine to eye
the arch of oneself, unknown
but becoming familiar
as seen to another

tu I had thought
rewritten in
exquisite other, *autre*
nous we