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Writing (new) worlds: poetry and place in a time of emergency

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ABSTRACT

It may appear that the act of writing is fruitless in the face of the size and open-ended complexity of gathering environmental calamities including global heating, species extinction, and the appearance of plastic in everything. And yet – and yet – poets and others continue to write in ways that allow us to think about the earth's futures and, more specifically, the future of place in catastrophic times. Geo, Eco and Topo – poetics are acts of making – making earth, home, and place. Making earth as homeplace. This paper considers Juliana Spahr's book *Well Then There Now* as an entry point into thinking and writing about place in a relational way appropriate for a time of emergency. It focuses on the ways writing-as-making (poiesis) can help us to diagnose troubled worlds and prefigure new ones. The paper surveys the connections between geography and poetry, outlines the contributions of eco, geo and topo poetics and explores the hybrid poetics of *Well Then There Now* before advocating for the affordances of creative writerly approaches for geography more broadly.

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Introduction

Scholars and artists across disciplines and practices are agitated by the question of how to live in a time of emergency, or, as Anna Tsing and colleagues have put it, 'on a damaged planet' (Tsing et al. 2017). How do we live, they ask, amongst the ruins at the same time as we notice, and resist, the continuing processes of ruination? One answer they provide is radical transdisciplinarity (or even post-disciplinarity) – a joyful embrace of the possibilities that wilful disciplinary transgression can foster – particularly at the points where arts meet science (Dixon and Beech 2018; Straughan and Dixon 2014). Tsing and her colleagues suggest that 'to learn the stories of stones, geologists might use the insights of ethnographers and poets' (Tsing et al. 2017, G11). They invite us to move 'beyond the disciplinary prejudices in which each scholar is trained, to instead take a generous view of what varied knowledge practices might offer' (Tsing et al. 2017, G2). It is with this in mind that I explore the possibilities for noticing and resisting at the intersection of geography (and place-thinking more generally) with experimental poetry. My focus is on the book *Well Then There Now* by Juliana Spahr (2011).

Poetry is having a moment in the world of geography. There are geographers who are also poets (Acker 2018; Cresswell 2020; De Leeuw 2022; Jones 2022), geographers using poetry as a research tool (Madge 2014; Lanne 2022; Angeles 2017) and geographers looking to poetry as an alternative way of thinking about and representing the more-than-human world (Magrane 2021). Poetry appears in geography journals, and we have a book – *Geopoetics in Practice* – that connects

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geographers, poets, and geographer-poets in an exploration of the potentials that lie at the intersection of geography and poetry (Magrane et al. 2020). This recent flourishing is, itself, a continuation of a long tradition of geographies of literature and literary geographers which has, until recently, focused on novels rather than poetry (Hones 2022, 2014; Saunders 2013). It also forms part of a more general movement to encourage a plethora of engagements with the possibilities of creative methods and forms of representation that exceed the literary (de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017; Hawkins 2014). Looking at this the other way round, poets have pretty much always used geography as subject matter and inspiration – including themes of place, landscape, journey and the relationships between human and natural worlds. Just the word ‘geography’ has resonance for poets – a fact reflected in the titles of the work of many well-known poets (Bishop 2008 [1971]; Armitage 1988; Dorn 1965).

This geography/poetry mash-up should not be a surprise. Poetry has always asked us to reflect on our relationships with the world beyond the human. As the poet and essayist Kathleen Jamie, has noted, one of poetry’s strengths is its insistence on the power of noticing – of paying attention.

But why not privately mark a moment of attention as a moment of resistance? Who is to say it’s not? When we do that– step outdoors, smell Autumn in the wind, *seriously notice*– we’re not little cogs, little consumers, in someone else’s machine. We are not doing what the forces of destruction and inattention want us to do. It is our way of being, not theirs. It’s the simplest act of resistance and renewal. So long as it doesn’t become portentous, a joyless chore– we don’t want that. Or worse, ‘mindfulness’ which is a bit icky. We want our spontaneity! Joy and spontaneity are part of the supple weave of resistance. (Jamie 2019)

Noticing and paying heed, Jamie argues, are necessary parts of the construction of an alternative to the heedless present. Writing poetry is part of that, as it involves paying close attention to things. It also asks us to make connections between things that might not be immediately connected. That is, after all, what a metaphor is. This becomes particularly powerful when we connect across scales from the smallest thing to the biggest things. From individual snowdrops blooming in December (not just the wrong month, but the wrong year) to what the writer Timothy Morton calls hyperobjects (Morton 2013) – objects which are so large we cannot see the ends of them – objects which expand out in chaotic networks that threaten to challenge the possibility of human and other life on earth. Poets make connections such as this but so do scientists. Poets and scientists are both creative. We also know that the people in general are much more likely to pay attention to environmental change when it can be located in their own lives, at a scale that is comprehensible. Lots of environmental work in relation to global heating is now focussed on getting people to see something happening on their gardens or on their streets. Citizen science, for instance, asks us to pay careful attention to small things so that we can begin to piece together the networks that make big things and start, perhaps, to lead our lives more humbly in and with nature (Pritchard and Gabrys 2016). This is one of the purposes of eco-poetry too – to jump scales so that unlikely things might be connected. Poetry then, is not the only form of noticing, but it is an important one. Poetry is unlikely to be the magic bullet that gives us access to a new fairer, more ecologically sane world but it is part of the toolkit.

Ecopoetics, geopoetics, topopoetics

Here, I focus on the intersection of three kinds of poetics – ecopoetics, geopoetics, and topopoetics – all terms that apply to aspects of my own poetry as well as the poet I focus on here – Juliana Spahr. Let us take each in turn. Eco stems from the Greek *oikos*, which roughly means ‘household’ but in the widest sense of all the ways we make the earth into a home. ‘Geo’, as we all know, also stems from ancient Greek and mean the earth but also land, ground, country, and soil. ‘Topo’ comes from *topos*. *Topos* means ‘place’ but also means literary or rhetorical form. A poem is a place as much as it is about a place, or about place in general. In this sense, topopoetics recognized the geography of the text itself and shares much with Sheila Hones’ insistence on literary geography as the study of literature as geographical events, happenings, and performances (Hones

2022). Poetics, of course, comes from the ancient Greek term for making – bringing something into existence that did not previously exist. The poetry I am focused on moves between, and often combines these three themes of house/home, earth/land/ground/soil, and place. When poetry is located at the heart of this particular Venn diagram is joins in purpose with what Yi-Fu Tuan identified as the purpose of geography – the study of earth as the home of humanity (Tuan 1991).

The term eco-poetics comes from the editor of the journal of the same name, Jonathan Skinner, who noted, in 2001, that poetry, and especially avant-garde poetry, had surprisingly little to say about environmental catastrophe (Skinner 2001b). Environmentalists, on the other hand, appeared, in his mind, to have a stunted imagination when it came to the range of expressive forms that were at their disposal – and avant-garde or modernist poetry in particular. “Environmentalist” culture’, Skinner wrote,

has ignored most developments in poetics since Ezra Pound. The literature of this largely Anglo-American tradition (which can be found in many a Freshman composition reader) may be “eco” (especially when it references an admirable praxis or, as it were, “walks its talk”) but it certainly comes up short in “poetics” – demonstrating overall, for a movement whose scientific mantra is “biodiversity,” an astonishing lack of diversity in approaches to culture, to the written and spoken word. (Skinner 2001a, 7)

ecopoetics nevertheless takes on the “eco” frame, in recognition that human impact on the earth and its other species, is without a doubt the historical watershed of our generation, a generation born in the second half of the twentieth century. The avant-gardes of the last decades of that century, noted for linguistically sophisticated approaches to difficult issues, stand to be criticized for their overall silence on a comparable approach to environmental questions. (One does not find the same reticence among the visual arts.) It is precisely because of this historical urgency that *ecopoetics* appropriates “eco” (and, for that matter, “poetics”)—to return them to the drawing board. (Skinner 2001a, 7)

Eco-poetry is often conflated with the longer tradition of nature poetry, our inheritance from Romantics. Even the term, nature poetry, suggests a subject – ‘nature’ – which is somehow separate from other things. Skinner reflects on this shortcoming:

There is a rich tradition of nature writing in American literature (of which Thoreau is by no means the first exemplar) that has unfortunately become, for a variety of reasons, only more formally conservative as we have progressed into the crisis. One might increasingly compare this literature to a formal monocrop that belies the biological diversity it intends and, more damagingly, that tends to overlook or remove human language from the very materiality, and relationships, it would emphasize. (Skinner 2001b, 105)

The very act of naming a genre of poetry as nature poetry does some of the damage that ecopoets seek to avoid and counter. It enacts a separation of a world called nature from other things – particularly human things.

While it would be foolish to insist on a strict boundary between what we might conventionally call ‘nature poetry’ and ‘eco-poetry’, I do like the observation Juliana Spahr, who notes the necessity of accounting for both the ‘beautiful bird’ (the stereotypical object of nature poetry) *and* the ‘bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird’s habitat’ (Spahr 2011, 69) (what makes it ecopoetry). In this formulation, traditional nature poetry is based on a separation of the natural world from the human world and insists on the otherworldliness of natural objects as beautiful, innocent, or awe-inspiring. Ecopoetry, on the other hand, is more focussed on the ways we make the house of earth into a home, and all the ways we do that badly.

Geo-poetics has a different and more recent lineage. Swapping ‘eco’ for ‘geo’ replaces home with earth – poetry as earth making. The term, geopoetics, as an intentional term for a particular kind of poetic practice, originates in 1979 in the work of Kenneth White and his International Institute of Geopoetics, which he founded ten years later, in 1989. White described geopoetics as a reaction to the recognition that ‘the earth (the biosphere) was in danger and that ways, both deep and efficient, would have to be worked out in order to protect it’ and the simultaneous acknowledgement that ‘the richest poetics came from contact with the earth, from a plunge into biospheric space, from an attempt to read the lines of the world’.¹

In fact geopoetics provides not only a place, and this is proving more and more necessary, where poetry, thought and science can come together, in a climate of reciprocal inspiration, but a place where all kinds of specific disciplines can converge, once they are ready to leave over-restricted frameworks and enter into global (cosmological, cosmopoetic) space. One question is paramount: how is it with life on earth, how is it with the world?²

The term ‘geopoetics’ actually has an earlier and surprising origin. The term ‘geopoetry’ was used by the geologist, Harry Hess, one of the key scientists in the theory of plate tectonics. His revolutionary article announcing his theories, published in 1962, was titled ‘History of Ocean Basins’. In the introduction he wrote ‘I shall consider this an essay in geopoetry’ (Hess 1962, 599). He seems to mean by this term that the paper is lacking in the factual information necessary to make a good scientific case. In some ways the paper was a work of imagination about the earth – a very different way of coming to a hypothesis about the natural world. The Canadian poet, Don McKay, put it this way.

I think that Harry Hess, like Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, or any other creative scientist, enters a mental space beyond ordinary analysis, where conjecture and imaginative play are needed and legitimate, and that this is a mental space shared with poets. But even more than this poetic license, I would say, the practice of geopoetry promotes astonishment as part of the acceptable perceptual frame. Geopoetry makes it legitimate for the natural historian or scientist to speculate and gawk, and equally legitimate for the poet to benefit from close observation, and from some of the amazing facts that science turns up. It provides a crossing point, a bridge over the infamous gulf separating scientific from poetic frames of mind, a gulf which has not served us well, nor the planet we inhabit with so little reverence or grace. Geopoetry, I am tempted to say, is the place where materialism and mysticism, those ancient enemies, finally come together, have a conversation in which each hearkens to the other, then go out for a drink. (McKay 2012, 47)

So geopoetics (and geopoetry) shares much with ecopoetics (and ecopoetry). It professes a concern for the earth (‘geo’ comes from the Ancient Greek for ‘earth’, ‘ground’ of ‘soil’) and asks us to make an imaginative leap between the worlds of science, poetry and the mystical in order to produce new and hybrid kinds of earth-knowledge.

Geopoetics has had a recent boost in the world of geohumanities though the provocations of Eric Magrane in a series of essays (Magrane 2015, 2021) as well as though the book *Geopoetics in Practice* which he co-edited with Linda Russo, Sarah de Leeuw and Craig Santos Perez (Magrane et al. 2020). In the introduction to that book, the editors present a brief table comparing the projects of ecopoetics and geopoetics:

Geopoetics	Ecopoetics
‘Earth’	‘House’
place and space	organism + species
social theory	biology
climate	weather

(Magrane et al. 2020, 3).

In the introduction, Magrane reflects on the similarities and differences between ecopoetics and geopoetics. While ecopoetics explicitly engages with natural sciences, and particularly ecology, Magrane notes, the utility of thinking of the coming together of poetics and geography where geography, in a way that is more expansive than ecology, is an ‘edge discipline’ which connects natural sciences with social sciences and humanities and, as such, ‘may have more to offer a poetics engaged with the ongoing paradox of the twenty-first century’ (Magrane et al. 2020, 3). The concerns of ecology and ecopoetics, he notes, include particular spatial relationships which, in his words, ‘might be more accurately understood as geopoetics’ (Magrane et al. 2020, 3) For this reason, in his mind, geopoetics looks as much to social theory as it does to ecology. With that in mind, let me turn to the third term, one of my own making – topopoetics.

Topopoetics shares much with the projects of both ecopoetics and geopoetics. But it is not the same thing. *Topo* comes from *topos* (τόπος), the Greek for ‘place’. This is combined with *poetics*, which comes from *poiesis* (ποίησις), the Ancient Greek term for ‘making’. *Topopoetics* is thus ‘place-making’. The particular lineage I am invoking for *topos* derives from the philosophy of

Aristotle. Importantly, for our purposes, *topos* appears in both accounts of how the world comes into being and as a figure in rhetoric. In rhetoric a *topos* is a ‘particular argumentative form or pattern’ from which particular arguments can be derived.³ It is very much like a form in poetry – a sonnet or a villanelle. It has a particular shape. This rhetorical view of *topos* is linked to the world through the art of memorizing long lists by locating things on a list in particular *places*. ‘For just as in the art of remembering, the mere mention of the places instantly makes us recall the things, so these will make us more apt at deductions through looking to these defined premises in order of enumeration’.⁴ In Aristotle’s rhetoric it is important to choose the right kind of *topos* for the argument at hand, just as it is important to select the right form for a particular poet. It draws our attention to the importance of (among other things) the shape of the poem on the page.

We encounter *topos* most frequently in words such as ‘topography’ – a word which means the shape of a place. This is not derived from rhetorics but from a more geographical meaning of *topos* that also emerged from Aristotle (meaning, more or less, *location*). *Topos* was often used interchangeably with *chora* – a root for modern words such as ‘choreography’ and ‘chorology’ (the study of regions). *Chora* is most often translated as meaning something like ‘region’ or ‘room’ (Casey 1997; Malpas 1999; Walter 1988; Grosz 1995). After Aristotle *chora* gradually came to refer to administrative or technical regions while *topos* was gradually freed of its meaning of mere location and became a way of talking about sacred places such as burial sites.

The richer meaning of *topos* emerged more fully formed in the writing of Martin Heidegger and has been elaborated by the philosopher, Jeff Malpas (Heidegger 1971; Malpas 2012). Here *topos* is mobilized through the idea of the *topological* to indicate the primary nature of place for *being*. To put it bluntly, to be is to be *in place* – to be *here/there*. The connection between poetry and the idea of place as the site of being is right there at the outset as Heidegger’s insistence on being as being-in-place originated from an encounter with the poetry of Hölderlin (Malpas 2006; Elden 1999).

In an important series of late essays, Heidegger invokes poetry as a form of dwelling. He goes so far as to suggest that it is an ideal form of building and dwelling.

Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building.

Thus we confront a double demand: for one thing, we are to think of what is called man’s existence by way of the nature of dwelling; for another, we are to think of the nature of poetry as a letting-dwell, as a – perhaps even *the* – distinctive kind of building. If we search out the nature of poetry according to this viewpoint, then we arrive at the nature of dwelling. (Heidegger 1971, 213)

This observation (linking poetry to its root meaning of ‘making’) gets right to the heart of the constitution of topopoetics. Poetry, as Heidegger observes, is a kind of *building* and thus a particularly important kind of *dwelling*. This building-as-dwelling, however, is more than the practical stuff of constructing in the correct way – it is, in Heidegger’s view, about the essential character of being-in-the-world – being in, and with, place.

So, here we have three interrelated and overlapping forms of poetic philosophy and practice, eco-poetics (or home making), geo-poetics (or earth making) and topo-poetics (or place making). Each of them asks us to pay attention to aspects of the more-than-human world as we make our homes on and with Earth. Cumulatively, they also decentre the idea of the poet as the inspired individual with a unique sensitivity to the natural world around, what was invariably, ‘him’. These are relational poetics that recognize, for better or for worse, that humans are part and parcel of the equation. Returning to Kathleen Jamie, they move away from what she has called the ‘loan enraptured male’ version of nature writing towards a recognition of the peopling of place and landscape. In her review of Robert Macfarlane’s book *The Wild Places* Jamie writes:

The strikes into Scotland or Ireland or Wales are just that – strikes, then retreats. Cambridge is still the centre of the world: we started there and will end there, albeit up a tree. It’s also politically comforting, for land-owners: there will be no revolution. Macfarlane speaks of gravesites like Maes Howe and Sutton Hoo as ‘uplifting’. ‘The exhilaration you feel has something to do with the innocence of the assumptions embodied in such a gravesite.’ I’m afraid my hackles are rising again. Innocence? Sutton Hoo? Maes Howe? Thousands of years

separate the two, but both speak of power and elitism, surely. These aren't wee plaques on a mountainside. Contemporary power structures and land issues are not mentioned either. It's reassuring, but the effect of ignoring all this is to put the wild places outside history again. (Jamie 2008, 26)

Eco, Geo and Topo poetics all refuse to place the world of nature outside of history, and, often, they turn away from the 'I' that produces much nature writing since the Romantics. The act of paying attention, or noticing, turns from attention to some version of external nature and towards the knotty problems of home and place making in the Anthropocene – problems that entangle us in the more-than-human world around us and which we are part of. I want to say that an adequate way of paying attention and noticing in the middle of environmental emergency, is to notice through place – that an effective eco-poetics is also a topopoetics. We can pay attention to the slow violence of environmental catastrophe through the assemblages we are part of – from inside rather than outside. With that in mind, I turn here to the poetry of Juliana Spahr as an exemplar of the poetics of place in a time of emergency.

Reading Well Then There Now

Juliana Spahr is an American experimental poet who lived and taught in Hawai'i for seven years. Her work moves between lyrical poetry and theoretical exposition, often in the same book. In both her poetry and theoretical texts – and sometimes in tests which are both at the same time, Spahr works against the tradition of nature poetry produced by the singular inspired 'I' that we most often associate with the legacy of the romantics. Her work explores forms of collectivity and relationality in a more-than-human world. Behind her work is a sense that experimentation is necessary to get beyond modes and habits of thought that have got us into the mess we are in. Experimental hybrid writing allows us to think differently (Welch 2014). While Spahr is informed by the experimental poetics of Gertrude Stein and the Language poets, she has made it clear that she wants to take that further and bring their language experiments to bear directly on the political world stating that

I want to say that to not take a clear stand in your writing against empire, against the United States military industrial complex, against the repressive economic policies of the United States, against the disproportionate wealth and resource use of United States citizens seems to me to be a missed opportunity to have the writing matter in some way. (quoted in Welch 2014, 5)

Spahr's politics are informed by anarchism and anti-state communism and together with two colleagues has formed the independent publisher, Commune Editions which is an imprint of AK books – a mainstay of anarchist publishing.

Spahr's book *Well Then There Now* (2011) is an extraordinary example of the embrace of a hybrid form which seems particularly well-suited to an eco, geo and topopoetic project. In this book, and elsewhere, Spahr, uses techniques of repetition, parataxis, multiple points of view, prose fragments and the incorporation of existing texts to avoid this sense of the gifted individual sensitivity to 'nature'.

In a note at the end of her poem, 'Things of Each Possible Relation', Spahr reflects on what she calls 747 poems – poems written by people who would fly into Hawaii, marvel at the beaches, mountains and unusual birds, write a poem about them and fly back out and publish them in the *New Yorker*. Her poetic task, as someone who lived in Hawaii but was not native to it, was to not write a 747 poem. In the note she described how she took ethnobotany classes to learn the names of plants, how she became interested in seeing Hawaii from the sea (the view of those arriving) and seeing the sea from the land – and how these two views hashed against each other. It is here that she talks about how she read the new journal *Ecopoetics* and realized that what she was looking for 'all along was in the tradition of ecopoetics – a poetics full of systematic analysis that questions the divisions between nature and culture – instead of a nature poetry' (Spahr 2011, 71).

Well Then There Now was published in 2011. It consists of eight poems and prose pieces. The poems and prose all make sense as stand-alone pieces but gain extra punch when considered in the context of the collection as a whole, and the way it is structured. Each of these is prefaced by a simple two-tone, greyscale, map with a white roundel indicating a location. Each title is accompanied by a location in degrees of longitude and latitude directly above it. Two of the pieces are passages of prose about specific streets in Hawai'i – Dole Street, and 2199 Kalia Road. These poetic psycho-geographical essays include photographs taken by the author. As a whole, then, *Well Then There Now* is a mix of free verse poems, prose, images, notes and references. It's meta structure signals that it is a long way from what we might think of as 'nature poetry'. It is a hybrid text that is experimental in both its overall structure and at the level of the individual line.

In 'Unnamed Dragonfly Species' Spahr lists the names of species that were in danger of becoming extinct in New York State at the time interlaced with information, gathered from the internet, concerning the effects of climate change on glaciers around the world. The poem is divided into eleven blocks of text of varying lengths and the names of the endangered species appear in bold and in alphabetical order with no punctuation separating the name from the text that comes after. In the early parts of the poem the information about glaciers appears as disembodied information:

In November of the previous year a big piece of the Antarctic Pine Island glacier broke off. **Banded Sunfish** A crack had formed in the glacier in the middle of the previous year. **Barrens Bucktooth** And then by November the piece had just broken off. **Bicknells Thrush** It had just taken a few months from crack to breaking point. **Black Rail** The iceberg that was formed was twenty-six miles by ten miles. **Black Redhorse** Then in the following March, the March of the same year of the 90 degree April, the Larsen B ice shelf shattered and separated from the Antarctic Peninsula. **Black Skimmer** All of this happened far away from them. **Black Tern** They had never even been near Antarctica. **Blandings Turtle**. (Spahr 2011, 76)

Over the course of the poem, it becomes clear that there are people looking up glacial information on the internet and connecting this information to other information such as 'That 1988 was a sort of turning point year as it was the beginning of each year being the hottest year on record year after year'. The poem's focus gradually moves to the 'they' of the poem and various aspects of their lives that were far removed from the glaciers in question.

Gray Wolf And some of them were living for part of that year right at the edge of where the Wisconsin glacier had ended thousands of years ago and the town in which lived had a flat part and a hilly part as a result but even though the geography of their daily life was so clearly formed by a glacier they didn't really think about the warm year and things melting. **Green Floater** Some of them worked in an anarchist bookstore. **Green Sea Turtle** Some of them had tans that summer that they got from walking outside because they needed to be outside walking around in order to think about how best to be somewhat content in this life right now. **Grizzled Skipper** Some of them drove cabs. **Harbor Porpoise** None of them really fell in love but some of them had lovers. **Hart's-Tongue Fern**. (Spahr 2011, 81)

The poem's final sections link these everyday activities more clearly to the interconnected larger systems that threatened the existence of glaciers.

Unnamed Dragonfly Species They were anxious and they were paralyzed by the largeness and the connectedness of systems, a largeness of relation that they liked to think about and often celebrated but now unbearably tragic. **Upland Sandpiper** The connected relationship between water and land seemed deeply damaged, perhaps beyond repair in numerous places. **Vesper Sparrow** The systems of relation between living things of all sorts seemed to have become in recent centuries so hierarchically human that things not human were dying at an unprecedented rate. **Wavy-rayed Lamppussel** And the systems of human governments and corporations felt so large and unchangeable and so distant from them yet the effects of their actions felt so disconnected and so immediate to what was happening. **Whip-poor-will** They knew this but didn't know what else to do. **Wood Turtle** And so they just went on living while talking loudly. **Worm Snake** Living and watching on a screen things far away from them melting. **Yellow-breasted Chat**. (Spahr 2011, 92-93)

The poem intersperses and juxtaposes dying species with both melting ice and the everyday lives of people in Brooklyn, a location indicated by the map and coordinates at the start of the poem. The

list acts as a poetic constraint and organizing principle moving through the alphabet and providing an unnerving meta-rhythm for the poem as a whole. The list also shows us some of the work we humans do when making homes out of the and on the earth – the kind of ordering signified by listing and the alphabet – the incompleteness of which is amplified by title and its appearance towards the end as Unnamed Dragonfly Species. Once we know we are in an alphabet we also know we are moving towards an ending although here, there are no species beginning with Z so we have to end with Y, and the ending is not really an ending as there is no full stop. We are close to the end but still moving forward – living, while talking loudly.

It is a characteristic of Spahr's poetry that she complicates the usual 'I' of nature poetry. Her poems, including Unnamed Dragonfly Species, use 'we' and 'they' in confusing ways. The first lines of the first poem in the collection, 'Some of We and the Land that was Never Ours', launches straight into an interrogation of this 'we'.

We are all. We of all the small ones are. We are all. We of all the small ones are. We are in this world. We are together. We are together. And some of we are eating grapes. Some of we are all eating grapes. Some of we are all eating. We are all in this world today. Some of we are eating grapes today in this world. And some of we let our ourselves eat grapes. In the eating of grapes. We of all the small ones let ourselves eat grapes. (Spahr 2011, 11)

As the poem progresses, the 'we' and the 'grapes' are joined by some sparrows who are fed grape seeds. Spahr reflects on 'what it means to settle' and to arrange and to own.

And we were the land's because we were eating and the land let some of us eat. And we were the ground because we eat and ground let some among us eat. And yet the land was never some of ours. But the ground was never sure with us. Is never some of ours. Be never certain with us. (Spahr 2011, 12)

At the end of the poem Spahr provides a note about a time she was in France watching tourists and people eating grapes and feeding sparrows with their seeds while someone sang 'we are all in this world together'. Spahr was thinking about grapes moved from France to California and back again, and about her French grandfather who moved to Canada as well as more abstract things like divisions and ownership. She also contemplated inaugural poems. The poem, she notes, was produced by putting her words, written in the park that day, into a translation machine and moving the text between English and French repeatedly until she had a different sort of English as we read in the poem. Her reference to inaugural poems is interesting as these are traditionally poems that tell hopeful or triumphant narratives of national identity and belonging. They typically have an expansive sense of 'we' as in 'we the people'. Typical of this is Robert Frost's inaugural poem for John F Kennedy – 'The Gift Outright'⁵ – a poem which begins:

The land was ours before we were the land's.
 She was our land more than a hundred years
 Before we were her people. She was ours
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
 But we were England's, still colonials,
 Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed.

It is some of this version of 'we' and the relationship between 'we' and 'land' that is put through Spahr's translation machine along with the sparrows and grapes (Phillips 2015). The result is a 'we' that is both more expansive – a global 'we' – and more troubled by its relations with the world around it.

Returning to 'Unnamed Dragonfly Species' 'we' is replaced by 'they'. Right at the outset we are introduced to the 'they' who are daffodils.

The City of Rotterdam sent over daffodils. **A Nocruid Moth** The daffodils bloomed in the first weeks of April. **Allegheny Woodrat** They were everywhere. **American Bittern** They were yellow. **American Burying Beetle** It was April and then the temperature was 90 degrees and all the daffodils died immediately. **Arogos Skipper** All at the same time. **Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtle** This happened right where they were living. **Atlantic Ridley Sea Turtle** It was early April. **Bald Eagle**. (Spahr 2011, 75)

The ‘they’ who are daffodils, of course, remind us of the famous daffodils of Wordsworth. Those daffodils were encountered by the poet who was most definitely ‘I’, a singularity underscored by the first sentence ‘I wandered lonely as a cloud’. In Spahr’s poem, both the daffodils and the humans are quite different, being locked in a complicated web of more-than-human relationality. Daffodils sent from Rotterdam to Brooklyn. Part of an unending hyperobject.

Elsewhere in the collection, Spahr moves back from ‘they’ to ‘we’ in the quite startling poem ‘Gentle now, don’t add to heartache’. The poem is in five parts which tell a kind of origin story as well as a kind of fall. Part one launches ‘we’ into the midst of things.

We come into the world.

We come into the world and there it is.

The sun is there.

The brown of the river leading to the blue and the brown of the
ocean is there.

Salmon and eels are there moving between the brown and the brown
and the blue.

The green of the land is there.

Elders and younger are there.

Fighting and possibility and love are there.

And we begin to breathe.

We come into the world and there it is.

We come into the world without and we breathe it in.

We come into the world.

We come into the world and we too begin to move between the
brown and the blue and the green of it.

(Spahr 2011, 124)

In Part Two, the ‘we’ who has arrived begins to engage and interact with the world ‘we’ arrive in, learning, observing, counting, recognizing and loving the world around. The ‘we’ becomes part of a greater ‘we’ by its final breathless sentence

And we couldn’t help this love because we arrived at the bank of the
stream and began breathing and the stream was various and
full of information and it changed our bodies with its rotten
with its cold with its clean with its mucky with fallen leaves
with its things that bite the edges of the skin with its leaves
with its sand and dirt with its pungent at moments with its
dry and prickly with its warmth with its mushy and moist
with its hard flat stones on the bottom with its horizon lines
of gently rolling hills with its darkness with its dappled light
with its cicadas buzz with its trills of birds. (Spahr 2011, 125–126)

Part Three introduces the refrain that forms the title as ‘they’ learn to love through the recognition of layers and connections. The vague nouns of earlier in the poem become very specific as species start to be listed in lists that are uncomfortably long to read – long enough to gesture towards their endlessness.

We learned and we loved the black sandshell, the ash, the American
bittern, the harelip sucker, the yellow bullhead, the beech,
the great blue heron, the dobsonfly larva, the water penny
larva, the birch, the redhead, the white catspaw, the elephant
ear, the buckeye, the king eider, the river darter, the sauger,
the burning bush, the common merganser, the limpet, the
mayfly nymph, the cedar, ... (Spahr 2011, 126)

And this list goes on for some time before we are reminded ‘and this was just the beginning of the list’. This beginning of a list is followed by a refrain of sentences that begin with ‘Our hearts took on’ each time followed by fragments of what we might call ‘nature’ – the shape of pools, floodplains, sycamore trees – that kind of thing until ‘we’ start to sing the refrain of the title:

We sang gentle now.

Gentle now clubshell,

don’t add to heartache.

Gentle now warmouth, mayfly nymph,

don’t add to heartache.

Gentle now willow, freshwater drum, ohio pigtoe,

don’t add to heartache.

Gentle now walnut, gold fish, butterfly, striped fly larva,

don’t add to heartache.

Gentle now black fly larva, redbreast dace, tree-of-heaven, orange-foot
pimpleback, dragonfly larva,

don’t add to heartache.

(Spahr 2011, 128–129)

Part Three ends with ‘Gentle now, we sang, Circle our heart in rapture, in love-ache. Circle our heart’. Up to this point, despite the disavowal of ‘I’ for ‘we’ the listed contents, the assemblage of things, might be identified as the contents of nature. But Part Four is a turn in the poem as the human world starts to infiltrate this form of thrown-togetherness and become part of the song – a song that becomes a lament

It was not all long lines of connection and utopia.

It was a brackish stream and it went through the field beside our
house.

But we let into our hearts the brackish parts of it also.

Some of it knowingly.

We let in soda cans and we let in cigarette butts and we let in pink
tampon applicators and we let in six pack of beer connectors
and we let in various other pieces of plastic that would travel

through the stream.

And some of it unknowingly.

We let the runoff from agriculture, surface mines, forestry, home
wastewater treatment systems, construction sites, urban yards,
and roadways into our hearts.

We let chloride, magnesium, sulfate, manganese, iron, nitrite/nitrate,
aluminum, suspended solids, zinc, phosphorus, fertilizers,
animal wastes, oil, grease, dioxins, heavy metals and lead go
through our skin and into our tissues.

(Spahr 2011, 130–131)

This echoes, of course, the first poem of the collection and its links to Robert Frost's 'The Gift Out-right' and its sense of the land being ours and 'we' being the land's. Here, in Spahr's hands, the land and the body possess each other in quite different and toxic ways. The body of 'we' is literally infiltrated by the world beyond which enters both our hearts and our skin and tissues. This movement between body and land, or body and place, mirrors the earlier passage in Part Three where 'we' learn to love the stream 'and it changed our bodies with its rotten with its cold with its clean with its mucky with fallen leaves'.

Part Five is the final part of the poem. Between parts four and five another turn takes place as 'we' becomes 'I' – but quite a strange kind of grammatically awkward 'I'. An 'I' that turns away from the stream and to 'each other' – a plural self-regarding human kind of 'I'.

Ensnared, bewildered, I turned to each other and from the stream.

I turned to each other and I began to work for the chemical factory
and I began to work for the paper mill and I began to work for
the atomic waste disposal plant and I began to work at keeping
men in jail.

I turned to each other.

I didn't even say goodbye elephant ear, mountain madtorn, butterfly,
harelip sucker, white catspaw, rabbitsfoot, monkeyface,
speckled chub, wartyback, ebonyshell, pirate perch, ohio
pigtoe, clubshell.

I replaced what I knew of the stream with Lifestream Total
Cholesterol Test Packets, with Snuggle Emerald Stream Fabric
Softener Dryer Sheets, with Tisserand Aromatherapy Aroma-
Stream Cartridges, with Filter Stream Dust Tamer, and
Streamzap PC Remote Control, Acid Stream Launcher, and
Viral Data Stream.

(Spahr 2011, 132–133)

Grammatically, of course, the phrase 'I turned to each other' makes little of no sense. 'I' should be 'we' or 'they' in this phrase. The structure unnerves us just as 'some of we are all eating grapes' unnerves the 'us' that is reconfigured as 'we'. The poem comes to an end with the narrator no longer singing but totally absorbed in 'each other'. In toto, the poems and prose in *Well Then There Now* explore relationality in a more-than-human place by consistently questioning the idea of the individual through creative use of pronouns. Her work is an example of thinking of more-than-human life as what Donna Haraway, following M. Beth Dempster, calls *sympoiesis* – or 'making with'.

Nothing makes itself; nothing is really auto-poietic or self-organizing. ... This is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding. (Haraway 2017, M25)

And further:

We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities. Philosophically and materially, I am a compostist, not a post-humanist. Beings – human and not – become with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in earthly worlding and unworlding. (Haraway 2017, M45)

Spahr performs sympoiesis through her insistent focus on the multiple positions of they/us/we/I and her refusal to settle on a singular authoritative position across. This effect is deepened by another strategy – the use of repetition and refrain.

The repetition of a phrase – such as ‘I turned to each other’ – is another poetic device used by Spahr. There are many instances throughout *Well Then There Now* where Spahr uses the repetition of a phrase to produce a circling back effect – a device that allows both repetition of information and the gradual addition of both new material and subtle shifts in thought in a kind of spiral spatial structure that gathers in velocity and weight. Like the list in *Unnamed Dragonfly Species*, it is also a rhythmic device. A kind of refrain. In poetry terms, a refrain is more or less a chorus. A repeated phrase that may or may not change slightly as it is repeated. In traditional folk ballads the refrain was often meaningless something like ‘hey nonny nonny, ummatiddle do’. In geo-philosophical terms the notion of a refrain takes us to Deleuze and Guattari and their use of *ritournelle*, which is translated as refrain in English (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). A *ritournelle* actually refers to classical rather than folk music and is a passage of music between verses of song. The refrain, in Deleuze and Guattari, is a rhythmic repetition that makes some kind of provisional order out of chaos, momentarily bringing diverse things together before distributing them outwards again. Derek McCormack describes it in the following way:

Refrains have a territorializing function: that is, they draw out and draw together blocks of spacetime from the chaos of the world, generating a certain expressive consistency through the repetition of practices, techniques and habits. These territories are not necessarily demarcated or delineated, however: they can be affective complexes, “haze, atmospheric,” but sensed nevertheless, as intensities of feeling in and through the movement of bodies. (McCormack 2013, 7)

It is important to recognize, McCormack notes, that the refrain is ‘radically impersonal’ – not the product of an ‘I’ but a very expansive, more-than-human, ‘we’ or ‘they’ or ‘us’. The refrain, while repetitive, does not always repeat as an exact replica of itself, rather according to McCormack, they ‘are always potentially generative of difference, producing lines of thinking, feeling, and perceiving that may allow one to wander beyond the familiar’ (McCormack 2013, 8). The refrain, then is a poetic geographical philosophical idea that describes a kind of pulsing inward and outward movement. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, it is a repeated act of territorialization and deterritorialization through which things are constantly configured and reconfigured in assemblages. The refrain is a repeated return. It holds together the lines of flight of music through the constant return and repetition. In their words ‘Forces of chaos, terrestrial forces, cosmic forces: all of these confront each other and converge in the territorial refrain’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 312). Dianne Chisholm uses Deleuze and Guattari’s territorial refrain to think through Spahr’s *Unnamed Dragonfly Species*. She reflects on Spahr’s use of repetition and rhythm to think about how ‘we’ relate to land and ‘I’ to ‘each other’. ‘Her refrain’ Chisholm notes, ‘occurs not just at the end of stanzas, or in stanzas, more or less regularly repeated throughout the poem. Instead, her entire poem is a refrain, or is a block of small and large refrains’ (Chisholm 2014, 637). Rhythm and repetition combine in Spahr with the grammatical semantic strangeness to result in what Chisholm calls ‘lyrical derangement’. In *Unnamed Dragonfly Species*, the intertwining of listing and repetition enacts in form the topos it is accounting for – a relational world that moves between the specificity of Brooklyn and the expanded world of global warming and glacier retreat. Place and home are being done and undone.

There are other ways more-than-human entanglement is enacted in *Well Then There Now*. The second poem, *Sonnets*, consists of a series of sonnets that falls apart in the final sonnet as the last

two lines become long and entangled – a reflection of its theme of the impossibility of bunkering in a world that is connected. The two prose sections which follow particular streets in Hawai'i reflecting on labelling and naming practices, ownership and the idea of syncretism which is troubled in its final image of a nest.

Nests draw things together and have many points of contact. They swirl into a new thing, All sorts of items end up in them. I found one the other day on Dole Street that was full of twigs and leaves and feathers and gum and plastic string. (Spahr 2011, 50)

And then there is the remarkable final poem, 'The Incinerator', which opens with the narrator fucking Chillicothe. Chillicothe is not a person, but a place in Ohio.

as I do it I keep fumbling, Chillicothe seems disconnected from what's happening. I pull the shirt open, exposing the roads we take through hilltops and hollows, as we travel the line between glaciated and unglaciated and I look down at Chillicothe grinning, unable to believe I am actually about to do

unable to believe I am actually about to do what I have dreamed of so many times, and then Chillicothe says, "This is my first time." I laugh. I say, "You're kidding." Chillicothe whispers back, "I'm sorry." I look down at Chillicothe, my grin fading, marveling at flatness giving way to rolling hills. (Spahr 2011, 137)

This final form of connection and turning to each other is an example of what Sarah de Leeuw has named the *terrotic* – a word she invented for the book *Counter Desecration: A Glossary for Writing Within the Anthropocene* edited by Linda Russo and Marthe Reed. The *terrotic*, de Leeuw defines as:

to be aroused – especially to action, conservation, rewilding, writing and/or revolution – by (or in) ecology, physical geography, and/or nonhuman environments. Relating to the capacity of the earth to awaken sexual desire or excitement [in part for harnessing into alternate ways of living and being on the planet]. To desire, want, or have sexual appetites in relation to planetary forces and their preservation. An act of humans bringing or coming together with ecological nonhuman. (de Leeuw in Russo and Reed 2018, 67)

Here, an erotic relationship with place – both its human and non-human elements, expands the world of connections. The self is enlarged through erotic connection to an interconnected place assemblage – one that includes the glaciated and the unglaciated as well, the flatness and the rolling hills.

Conclusion

Climate change is clearly not the only thing going on in these poems. Species extinction, plastic pollution, settler colonialism, capitalism – it is all there assembling and disassembling. It is all there in Hawai'i and it is all there in Brooklyn. *Well Then There Now* is an example of place writing – it is its own assemblage, its own kind of place as Heidegger suggested. 'Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building' he wrote. Poetic place is an assemblage (De Landa 2016), a gathering (Casey 1987), a throwtogetherness (Massey 2005) that is the result of noticing, and which encourages attention. One way, and possibly the only way, we encounter hyperobjects such as climate change is in and through place. Place, as Anna Tsing has shown us, is where universals and abstraction gets purchase on the world (Tsing 2005). It is hard to notice, to pay attention to, climate change in general just as it is hard to focus on capitalism in general. They are abstractions. We can notice a bird building a nest with strands of plastic bags woven in. We can notice the blue plastic stalks of q-tips among the seaweed on the beach. We can notice the snowdrops blooming in December.

Spahr, like all poets working in the eco-poetic tradition, troubles the human/nature binary rather than reproduces it. The boundary, reinforced by the very designation of nature poetry, is being troubled and worried. Spahr gives us alternatives to the figure of solitary inspired male poet who is part of our inheritance from the Romantic movement. She gives us 'we' and 'they' and 'us' and an 'I' that turns to 'each other'. Her bodies are permeable ones that allow in both the

‘mushy and moist’ of the stream and the ‘soda cans’ and ‘cigarette butts’. Her places are spiralling sets of relations that coalesce and fall apart in refrains. Spahr is writing worlds, writing places, in her poems and topopoetic analysis, an analysis powered by geographical thinking, allows us to see some of the ways in which she achieves this.

It would be foolish, of course, to suggest that poetry changes the world. Poetry has very small audiences and modern, experimental poetry such as Spahr’s even smaller ones. If changing the world is your ambition, then poetry is probably not the answer. On the other hand, we frequently give credit and blame to the Romantic poets for being central to dominant views of nature in the modern west – views which see nature as separate from humanity. A form of imagination which can reasonably be identified as one root cause of our present predicament. Our ways of knowing, our forms of imagination, are both the root cause of environmental catastrophe and a central component in figuring a way out. Poetry is a highly concentrated form of language that allows language to do particular kinds of work through its assemblage of words and the things they refer to on the page. Through writing poems we practice the art of attention, dwelling in the world, and build new places. Poetically we dwell.

But the power of writing new worlds does not end with poetry of course. This is something we are all doing as we write. Poetry has particular affordances, but these affordances are always escaping poetry. This is particularly true of writing in the humanities. It makes perfect sense to read Juliana Spahr alongside Anna Tsing if you want to understand the power of the particular and the inescapable mesh of relationality. Indeed, Kathleen Jamie’s evocation of noticing as resistance is mirrored in the two introductions to the book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubant.

The seductive simplifications of industrial production threaten to render us blind to monstrosity in all its forms by covering over both lively and destructive connections. They bury once-vibrant rivers under concrete and obscure increasing inequalities beneath discourses of freedom and personal responsibility. Somehow, in the midst of ruins, we must maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying ... Living in as time of planetary catastrophe thus begins with a practice at once humble and difficult: noticing the worlds around us. (Tsing et al. 2017, M7).

In addition to helping us feel and think the wicked problems of the world in different ways, Spahr’s poetry, and *Well Then There Now* in particular, signposts the possibilities of writing differently within the discipline of geography. The use of parataxis, juxtaposition, refrain, and other poetic techniques help us to pay attention – to notice the non-linear, relational, and overdetermined complexities of living in a time of emergency. While we may not all choose to be poets, we can be alert to the possibilities and affordances that creative writing brings to our joint endeavours. We are beginning to see a flourishing of creative writing in an academic context that points towards the possibilities that such a mash up brings. Anna Tsing’s work is one example, but we also have Katherine McKittrick’s exuberant use of the space of the page to write black geographies in her book *Dear Science* (McKittrick 2021) or Laura Ogden’s use of outlaw stories in her book *Swamplife* (Ogden 2011), an account of the entangled life of the Florida everglades. All of these, like Spahr’s poetry, reveal how noticing, thinking, and writing can form a nest-like assemblage that opens up thrilling possibilities for the ways we do our work.

Notes

1. Kenneth White, Inaugural text, The International Institute for Geopoetics <http://www.geopoetics.org.uk/what-is-geopoetics/>.
2. Ibid.
3. For a discussion see the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/#7.1>.
4. Aristotle *Topics* 163b28.32.
5. See <https://poetry.foundation.org> for a complete text of the poem.

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