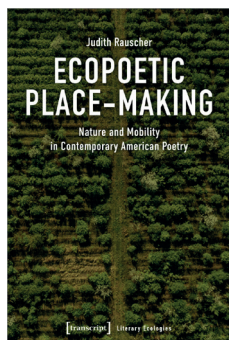




ECOPOETIC PLACE-MAKING: NATURE AND MOBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

by Judith Rauscher
(A Book Review)



Twenty years into the 21st century, the matters of forced mobilities, relocations and displacement are more than ever issues at hand, as we keep on witnessing ceaseless global migratory movements resulting from political persecutions, wars, violence, and/or climate change. Precisely taking the cue from this present-day issue, namely the intersections of environmental change, global ecological crisis and human mass mobilities, Judith Rauscher's *Ecopoetic Place-Making* (2023) focuses on contemporary “American ecopoetries of migration,” namely “the oeuvres of [...] chosen poets that prominently feature American places and American histories of displacement” (2023: 31).

Drawing mostly from the fields of Ecocriticism and Mobilities Studies, her work explores the complex relationship between migratory subjects and the non-human world, in particular, “the many ways in which human-nature relations are shaped by physical and geographical movement, whether voluntary or forced” (2023: 34) as well as “the varying effects that these displacements in place and between places have [...] on the environmental imaginaries in the works of contemporary American poets of migration” (2023: 24). Inspired by some approaches offered by Critical Region-

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alism (a recent field of study that focuses on the representations of place-formations and non-urban environments, whilst reflecting primarily on matters of race and histories of dispossession), building on Mobility Studies scholars' work such as Sheller and Urry's "The New Mobilities Paradigm," investigating how people imagine "the atmosphere of place" (2006: 218)—a matter that more often than not features in the poetry and literature of exile and displacement—and examining what ecocritics have defined as "sense of place" (Buell 2005; Heise 2008), Judith Rauscher's study, as she explains in her introductory chapter, "seeks to generate insights of value for the critical debates surrounding mobile culture and cultural mobility in these fields [viz., Cultural Studies and the social sciences] as well as in the humanities at large" (2023: 22). Following in Nixon (2011) and DeLoughrey's (2007; 2011; 2019) footsteps, the author also engages with environmental theories of displacement that consider the role played by human and nonhuman mobilities in place-making and in the formation of postcolonial and transnational ecologies. More specifically, her work examines "the complex cultural ecologies" (2023: 23) resulting from the experiences of diaspora and displacement in the Caribbean, in the Pacific, and in the continental United States. Similar to Jim Cocola's study of spatiality in American poetry, Rauscher concentrates on works of poetry that investigate how the concept of place can become a "pivotal axis of identification" (2016: xi), something capable of creating translocal, planetary, and cosmic connections. But whereas Cocola focuses primarily on a wide range of poetic traditions across America from Modernism to present times, addressing the connections above in relation to the issues of mobility only occasionally, Rauscher's study deals specifically with late 20th- and early 21st century migrant poets "who evoke the complex layering of American places, the ways various kinds of human mobilities affect human environments, and the human-nature relationships as well as environmental imaginaries that emerge from the encounters of mobile subjects with the non-human world," while always keeping an ecocritical approach that allows her to reflect "on the social and environmental significance of practices of poetic place-making in the context of mobility" (2023: 29).

Indeed, *Ecopoetic Place-Making* offers an interesting and thought-provoking analysis of five contemporary authors (Craig Santos Perez, Juliana Spahr, Derek Walcott, Agha Shahid Ali, and Etel Adnan), migrants of different national, cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Drawing inspiration from their own experiences of mobilities, these poets, through their works, challenge restrictive and exclusive ideas of place-attachment. Moreover, while actively engaging in ecopoetic place-making—a “restorative or constitutive practice” that, according to Rauscher, takes place among more-than-human communities and consists in human-nature relations in a particular place (2023:16)—they prove that poetry can serve as a tool to envision and “produce environmental imaginaries” (2023: 16) fit for our globalized age.

The first chapter, “Decolonizing Environmental Pedagogy,” is devoted to CHamoru poet, scholar, and activist, Craig Santos Perez. His series of poetry collections, titled *from unincorporated territory* (2008–ongoing), is at the center of Rauscher’s analysis, which sheds light on Perez’s examination of Indigenous practices of place-making, as well as his exploration of the creative modes of resistance against acts of land-taking committed by settlers in his native island of Guam/Guåhan. By showing both past and contemporary acts of colonial violence, along with the environmental devastation that has taken place over the years in the Pacific, Perez’s poetry becomes a tool of resistance against the never-ending violation of rights of Pacific Islanders, whose collective well-being and environmental integrity are continuously at stake. According to Rauscher, Perez’s framing of CHamoru place-making on his native island of Guåhan can be considered “an epistemological and political project of decolonization that must be attentive to the inextricable link between cultural and environmental losses, while also addressing histories of immobilization and mass mobility” (2023: 43). Taking the cue from the work of other scholars, this chapter intends to demonstrate how Perez’s poetry strives to enlighten readers and sensitize them to the detrimental consequences of military invasion and colonial confinement on the natural environment of Guåhan, as well as on the CHamoru people’s relationship with the non-human world. Perez’s collections investigate how the environmental

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wisdom of the CHamoru has been threatened both by ecological devastation and by the immobilization of the CHamoru people, as well as the effects of continental migrations and tourism, which disrupt the native community of Pacific Islanders. As argued by the author, Perez opposes these past and present disruptions with a “participatory ecopoetic that promotes poetry as a means of mobile CHamoru place-making and community formation and as a means of environmental pedagogy that seeks to engage the broadest audience possible” (2023: 47–48) to achieve a collective project of decolonization.

The second chapter, “Situating Ecological Agency,” focuses on Anglo-American settler poet Juliana Spahr’s *Fuck You—Aloha—I Love You* (2001) and *Well Then There Now* (2011), two collections written after and in response to the author’s move to Hawai’i. Here, Rauscher examines how Spahr’s “para-lyrical experimentations” (2023: 43) serve to delve into the constraints of settler ecological agency within the context of global capitalism and US imperialism. Spahr’s experimental ecopoetry questions the conventional notions of Anthropocene subjectivity by pointing out how various scales of human and non-human mobility contribute to the formation of ecosocial processes that impact and influence both individuals and collectivities. In doing so, Spahr’s ecopoetics of multi-scalar mobility do not simply call attention to non-human agencies or flatten the existing hierarchies between human and non-human agencies; actually, to Rauscher, Spahr poignantly questions and explores “the cultural and political conflicts as well as the emotional and cognitive contradictions produced by life in the Anthropocene for the more privileged demographic segments in the United States” (2023: 88). As Rauscher contends, Spahr’s poems about Hawai’i perfectly demonstrate this personal conundrum—the author’s desire as a continental migrant to connect with the non-human world of Hawai’i clashes both with Indigenous rights concerning lands access and control, and her own self-awareness of her position as a privileged settler—and showcase, as a result, how her efforts to engage in the practice of ecopoetic place-making can become “ethically fraught” (2023: 89).

Chapter three, “Lyricalizing the Planetary Epic,” turns its attention to Afro-Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, and, in particular,

to his book-length poem, *Omeros* (1990). Not only considering the more-critically acclaimed and discussed Caribbean sections, but mostly focusing on the understudied US-American passages of the poem, Rauscher here asks herself what happens when a poet, born and raised on a colonized island and used to idealized literary representations of English and American landscapes, questions not only these very same landscapes, but also US-American histories from a migratory perspective. In the scholar's view, Walcott's engagement with American places and histories of displacement from a perspective of mobility compels him to face the challenges intrinsic to eco-poetic place-making and, as a result, leads him to a new self-awareness, one that concerns itself with his possible implication in and complicity with neocolonial forms of exploitation and environmental destruction, as he is a transnational migrant, but nonetheless privileged. In the critic's analysis, Walcott's eco-poetics of mobility strictly depends on genre-mixing: merging together multiple literary genres, such as the epic with the pastoral, the travel poem, the (pastoral) elegy, and the confessional lyric, *Omeros*, according to Rauscher, can be read as "an environmentally resonant lyricization of epic that is ripe with tensions between the universal and the particular, the communal and the individual, the global and the local, the postcolonial and the transnational" (2023: 129). Walcott, indeed, challenges the Western poetic tradition and its typical representations of nature and mobility which have generally erased (or, at least, overlooked) past occidental histories of violence, displacement and exploitation. In doing so, Walcott "gestures toward a critical transnational sense of place" (2023: 135), which, consequently, allows Rauscher to read *Omeros* as a "lyricized *planetary epic*" that sheds light on "the discrepant scales of human and nonhuman histories" as well as "the possibilities and limits of an eco-poetry of migration" (2023: 136).

Kashmiri-American Agha Shahid Ali's poetry—its disposition toward the *translocal* and the environmental, as well as its engagement with "the crowded cartogram of US-American places, histories, literatures, and art" (2023: 167)—is the focus of the fourth chapter of the volume, "Reimagining Ecological Citizenship." Contrary to previous criticism, which usually concentrated either on Ali's poetry about Kashmir (the poet's place of birth)

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or on his *ghazals* (the poetic form Ali used most in his later poetry written and published within the American context), Rauscher's analysis delves deep into *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), one of the poet's mid-career collections, to examine which shape his eco-poetic place-making takes in his poems about the United States. Despite prominently featuring desertic landscapes belonging to the American Southwest, the speaker of the poems collected in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* appears to the readers as having already moved on somewhere else in the East Coast: here, Ali's speaker reveals his longing for meaningful relationship to his new place(s) of residence, including those parts of the United States he only passes/d through. As maintained by Rauscher, the project of eco-poetic place-making that takes place in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* can be seen as a "backward but also forward-oriented nostalgic longing for place-attachment without an insistence on permanent emplacement" (2023: 167). Infused with a profound sense of loss and longing, Ali's poetic engagements with American nonhuman environments, in fact, address the multiple and varied ways in which the relationships between human and place in the US are determined by human mobilities, both voluntary and forced. The nostalgic and "environmentally suggestive" (2023: 181) poems collected in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* do not simply recount physical human-nature connections but also evoke encounters with places in memory and through literature, blending a place-based and at the same time mobile poetic imagination with suggestive intertextual references, and a highly figurative language. In Rauscher's reading, Ali's eco-poetics of mobility is, thus, informed "by environmental nostalgia that depicts places as lived-and-imagined and as completely layered and translocal formations" (2023: 167): as a result, this collection does not simply aim at portraying "mobile forms of place-attachment," but also foregrounds a "diasporic intimacy with the world" (2023: 168).¹ Precisely this diasporic intimacy questions exclusive notions of ecological citizenship and asserts the possibility, for mobile subjects, to establish meaningful connections to the places they

1. A concept Rauscher derives from Svetlana Boym (2001), and further expands.

pass through, along with acknowledging their capacity to care deeply for places they inhabit either temporarily or forever.

The last chapter of this volume, “Queering Ecological Desire,” entails an analysis of the poetry of Lebanese-American painter and writer Etel Adnan. Ali’s collection *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* was read by Rauscher as an expression of profound longing for a diasporic intimacy with the world which intends to challenge econativist beliefs about belonging and emplacement to promote more mobile and inclusive ideas of ecological citizenship that include experiences of displacement. Similarly, Etel Adnan’s poetry displays—according to Rauscher—a “nature-oriented longing,” which consists, on the other hand, in “a queer ecological desire for an intimate connection with the more-than-human world from a different perspective toward mobility” (2023: 207). Whereas Ali’s migrant speaker writes from a precarious position, constantly on the move, as he tends to look back at past wonderings across America, the perspective employed by Adnan in her poetry is informed by two kinds of post-mobility: a re-orientation toward nature as a result of the disorientation caused by her own experience of migration, and in light of a new-found awareness of the advancing immobility that comes with old age. Drawing from Queer Ecocriticism and Queer Phenomenology, and expanding on Sara Ahmed’s work (2006), Rauscher focuses on Adnan’s poetry about the more-than-human world exploring human-nature relations from a perspective of migration—a topic hardly ever addressed in the scholarly discourse about this author. In her reading of Adnan’s collections *There: In the Light and the Darkness of the Self and of the Other* (1997), *Seasons* (2008), *Sea and Fog* (2012), and *Night* (2016), and in her analysis of their “mobile environmental imaginary,” both “the migrant’s desire for meaningful encounter with the more-than-human world” and the “apocalyptic environmental ethics informed by experiences of mobility” (2023: 208–209) are particularly emphasized by Rauscher. Despite Adnan’s concerns both with the climate change crisis and the physical consequences of her aging—issues that, for sure, do not paint an optimistic and cheerful picture of the future—at the core of her poetry stands a radical love for nature, one that hopefully will inspire the readers back into feeling the same sentiments of care

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and affection necessary to save the world. In doing so, Adnan seems to be embracing what Nicole Seymour (2013) described as a “queer ecological empathy” (2023: 234), thus, in Rauscher’s opinion, reaching towards “an imagination of a *queer ecological futurity* in the face of apocalypse” (2023: 209).

Without a doubt, Rauscher’s work offers a unique and original contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate regarding mobility, displacement, and practices of place-making in literature and, in particular, in poetry. Mainly aimed at scholars and researchers interested in Mobility Studies and Ecocriticism, *Ecopoetic Place-Making* will, however, also pique the interest of readers who approach this topic for the first time. The introductory chapter, in particular, will serve as an effective guide that will help beginners navigate some of the core issues belonging to this subject-area (such as the distinction between Nature and nature, or the concept of “sense of place” from a Mobility Studies perspective). Noteworthy is, for sure, Rauscher’s decision to analyze and discuss such a heterogeneous group of authors, thus giving voice to diversified experiences of displacement, colonization and migration—issues, more than ever, relevant to our globalized society.

Abstract: Twenty years into the 21st century, the matters of forced mobilities, relocations and displacement are more than ever issues at hand, as we keep on witnessing ceaseless global migratory movements resulting from political persecutions, wars, violence, and/or climate change. Taking the cue from the intersections of environmental transformations, global ecological crisis and human mass mobilities, Judith Rauscher’s *Ecopoetic Place-Making* (2023) focuses on contemporary “American ecopoetries of migration,” namely the “the oeuvres of [...] chosen poets that prominently feature American places and American histories of displacement” (2023: 31). Drawing mostly from the fields of Ecocriticism and Mobilities Studies, her work explores the complex relationship between migratory subjects and the non-human world, in particular, “the many ways in which human-nature relations are shaped by physical and geographical movement, whether voluntary or forced” (2023: 34) as well as “the varying effects that these displacements in place and between places have [...] on the environmental imaginaries in the works of contemporary American poets of migration” (2023: 24). *Ecopoetic Place-Making* offers an interesting and thought-provoking analysis of five contemporary authors (Craig Santos Perez, Juliana Spahr, Derek Walcott, Agha Shahid Ali, and Etel Adnan), migrants of different national, cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Drawing inspiration from their own experiences of mobilities, these poets, through their works, challenge restrictive

and exclusive ideas of place-attachment. This text is a critical review of Judith Rauscher's monograph.

Keywords: ecopoetics, place-making, place, mobilities, poetry, Judith Rauscher, ecocriticism, mobility studies, American poetry, American Literature

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RIAS VOL. 16, FALL-WINTER Nº 2/2023