



***Interim: the eco issue.*** Edited by Chris Arigo, Jonathan Skinner, and Matthew Cooperman, 29.1 (2011). <http://www.interimmag.org/>

Reviewed by David Tagnani, Washington State University

In the summer of 2011, the literature journal *Interim* published an issue devoted entirely to ecopoetics. Assistant Editor Christopher Arigo and Guest Editors Jonathan Skinner and Matthew Cooperman collected an array of contemporary poets for this issue. Rather than presenting a cohesive statement or a normative poetics, this issue of *Interim* serves as an illustration of just how diverse contemporary ecopoetry is. Breadth is the story here, and a genuine heteroglossia emerges. As editor-in-chief Claudia Keelan writes, the purpose of this collection is to “pose questions and positions relevant to the on going interactions of human beings and what we call the natural world.” Or, as per Cooperman, it is a “loose but intentional gathering.” They cast a wide net indeed, and the results are equally wide-ranging.

Each editor commands his own section, and among those sections, distinct differences emerge. The editors each supply a prose introduction that functions as a preface, as a brief statement of aesthetics, goals, perspectives, and poetics. Of note is their common desire to distance themselves from any normative aspirations: they emphasize that their collections are small corners of the larger poetic ecosystem. Cooperman, in his intro, reflects on the environmental disasters that served as the backdrop to his work on this issue of the journal. And yet he calls his approach “painfully personal,” as he senses the liminality of the work he has done, straddling the personal and the political, the subjective and the objective. Skinner’s section is unique in both form and content, reaching beyond poetry to include artwork, essays, interviews and other genres in a multi-modal exploration of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. This section is also the only one to consist of work done specifically for this issue. Though narrower in the scope of its subject matter, the greater breadth of genre and form makes this section intriguingly diverse and multivalent. Here, ecopoetics blends with ecopolitics and activism, becomes “investigative,” in the words of contributor Marcella Durand. Accordingly, some poets take on the task of appealing to their congressional representatives with/in their art. Cara Benson reflects on the experience of reading a poem to her representative’s staff, and Arielle Greenburg shares the actual letter she wrote to her state rep.

Arigo’s introduction makes it clear that he associates ecopoetics with a poetics of place. His personal sense of place guided his editorial choices, and he asked the poets to reflect on place in an addendum to their poems. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the poems in Arigo’s section tend to be explorations of the idea of ecopoetics as the poetry of place. Kim Burwick, Todd Fredson, Hoa Nguyen and Sarah Vap all write verses that explore the meaning and nature of their domestic places. Tod Marshall writes poems whose speakers are literally in their houses, eschewing the overused traveler/pilgrim/explorer voice as they hint at the etymology of “ecology.” For this review, I emailed Arigo some questions, a sort of virtual interview. Below are his responses.

*Dave Tagnani: In your introduction, you identify two general threads running through your selected poets: one, they are mostly local/regional; two, they are not typically identified as "ecopoets." What, then, were your criteria for the poetry? What did you look for when selecting the poems?*

*Chris Arigo: I approach editing, much like I approach my own writing: I just go on my nerve, my gut, to paraphrase O'Hara. Many of the poets I solicited were individuals that I know personally, individuals that I know have some connection to the land. Rosemarie Waldrop says that what obsesses us must emerge in our work—and it's true. I wasn't looking for overt "nature" poems. Instead, I was looking for threads of connection to place that run under the over weft of the poems. I wanted subtlety.*

*DT: You note in your intro that you asked the poets to include a "reflection on their place in the world." And in both the poems and the prologues, many of the poets (Linda Russo, Hoa Nguyen, Kim Burwick, Sarah Vap, etc.) write about what I would call "domestic" places. How does this focus on domestic, even human, places reflect the state of contemporary ecopoetics? What does it say about our changing concepts of nature, ecology, or place?*

*CA: I think the world of the domestic is THE starting place for connection. The domestic is a manageable (sometimes!) place/space to inhabit. It's the oikos in ecology. I think it's the human root of connection from which all larger connections grow. For example, the seed was planted for me in my grandfather's amazing garden. In the middle of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. From there it grew to the woods I grew up in in NE Pennsylvania. It spreads, this connection.*

*DT: What did working on this issue teach you about the ways in which contemporary ecopoetry is changing/continuing the long tradition of nature poetry?*

*CA: I think it takes into account a lot of places/spaces that had not before been considered in "nature" poetry: urban environments, urban nature, places neglected and forgotten, but thriving. I think it also moves away from notions of pastoral and the sublime—ideas that we now realize separate us more from nature more than they connect us. They're cultural constructions and I think many modern poets are too aware to fall back on these tropes, unless it's to subvert them.*

*DT: Why might it be appropriate/beneficial/enlightening to include a review of a poetry journal in a publication dedicated to ecocriticism?*

*CA: I think this issue is indicative of current trends: that is, people are becoming more aware that things are running out, that we're slowly committing suicide as a global community. People balk at the notion of sustainability—understandable, how much the word is used and abused—but it's really basic physics: we live on a planet with finite resources. Period. How fast we use them up, well, that's up to us.*