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THE POLITICAL IS PERSONAL: JULIANA SPAHR'S POLITICAL ECOLOGY

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Abstract

Who is the "we" whom Juliana Spahr addresses when writing her poetry and critical essays? Why is the collective so important when speaking about the risks and dangers of capitalism? In Spahr's views, climate change, indiscriminate production and waste, environmental degradation and human exploitation are part and parcel of the moral hazards of capitalism. In this chapter, I argue that Spahr's literary practice and her activism are interconnected and side with the concerns of fellow poets and readers in a transnational community—Spahr took part in the original demonstrations of the 2011 New York Occupy Wall Street movement. Focusing on the many and the multiple, rather than on isolated singularities, I reflect upon her emphasis both on "connective reading" (Spahr 2001) very much associated to collective identity, and on her support of the local (flora, fauna, species) versus the global. Spahr's profound knowledge of Hawaii, where she taught, researched and lived for several years, and her thoughts on impermanence and change, bring about a fresh and engaged language-oriented poetry with a strong insight into the physical and the material-political. In my exploration of Spahr's poetic practice, word and tone are shape-shifters and run parallel to geographical and environmental displacement.

Keywords: Juliana Spahr, ecology, activism, feminism, personal is political, pastoral, connective

Can we speak of a poetry and poetics which show a deep concern for alterity and for Nature? The study and ethical stance towards biodiversity, climate change, the excess growth produced by global capitalism and industrial and technological developments, converge today with the domain of (bio)ethics, with a sustainable economy and with efforts to reduce waste, to combat pollution and minimize the effects of indiscriminate production.

Poetry is not alien to examining the effects of the tensions between the economy and the environment. Within this contested terrain, the consequences of environmental hazard hit badly the weakest, women, the urban and rural poor, migrants, and the traditionally deprived and misrepresented working class. In

Juliana Spahr's work, her engagement with class[1] and with the consequences of being a forgotten and invisible member of the new proletariat tie in with the huge recent financial crisis and its aftermath: damaging and irreversible effects in the environment appear side by side with its detrimental impact on employment, harsh living conditions, precarious health and diminishing natural resources, whose access, essential for all, comes to be appropriated and exploited by transnational corporations under neoliberal policies. Grassroots activism has been essential in the life and work of Spahr, as a poet who identifies with post-Language poetry developments,[2] a working-class ethos and an engagement with politics and the environment.

In this chapter, I will specifically focus on Spahr's recent collection *Well Then There Now* (2011), where the poet, focusing on materiality and diversity, approaches the realities of decay, environmental hazard, extinction and exclusion in different formats, exploring in her rhetoric forms of address which are essentially plural and inclusive, and which operate "de-familiarizing" the readers' experience and expectations. To what extent are readers complicit with this general drift that leads to the deterioration of human relationships and of their interaction with the planet? One of the issues I will explore is the idea of the collective and collectivity, central in Spahr's poetry, as in her rhetorical turn to a "we" and abandonment of the "I". In other words, the poet herself identifies with some sort of woman of the crowd and addresses readers as one among all without distinguishing herself or wanting to take center stage.

I will attempt to demonstrate how this collectivity is systematically present in Spahr's poetry, engaging with the many, and the multiple, and exploring the possibilities of affiliations across differences. Spahr also emphasizes what she calls

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[1] In her monograph *Everybody's Autonomy* (2001), Spahr writes about her working-class origin, and her father's "unschooled obsession with reading" (xi). The preface reads, "[t]he harder part [in this book] has been the more personal one of who I am when writing this. I have often feel caught between an academic scene and a poetry scene that are often antithetical in desires and intents. I remain committed to both […]" (xi). In "The Incinerator", the last section of *Well Then There Now*, Spahr goes back to her commitment to a working class ethos, "I am wondering what calling myself working class covers over […] I had grown up by defining class as being about the sort of housing one had in relation to one's neighbors" (2011, 140).

[2] The language poetry movement thrived in the 1970s and early 1980s. A broad range of different poets might be considered part of this movement as diverse as Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, Jackson Mac Low or Carla Harryman, who broadly place emphasis on the material qualities of language, its production and reception, and are close to post-structuralist developments on signification, subjectivity and sociality.

"connective reading" (Spahr 2001) very much associated to collective identity. In her "Sonnets" sequence, and in the piece "Unnamed Dragonfly Species", the poet meditates upon the earth's resilience, about solidity and fluidity, and the contingencies and hazards produced by the current stage of capitalism. Animals, humans and other species interact in a common ground whose transformations, impermanence and fragility end up yielding unexpected and unprecedented changes. In Spahr's poetic practice, meaning shifts with context and runs parallel to geographical and environmental displacement.

Juliana Spahr's work remains complex and it participates of a post-postmodernist ethos in which genres no longer move along the lines they used to before the "linguistic turn" (Rorty 1992) came to happen in the second half of the twentieth century. Her work, heavily invested in the tradition of Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and in line with post-LANGUAGE poetry derivations, addresses essential issues which speak to individuality and collectivity, the social and the political, the environment within late capitalism, globalization and the dissolution of the local, and civic engagement versus disaffection from community and politics. It is precisely by bringing politics and green activism together with poetry that Spahr's work develops multiple senses of locality and care, drawing on the strengths of each activity. The depth of thinking in time and location within history and geography, as well as the critical stance to approach how power writes itself on human-environment relations brings in an increased criticality to poetry and poetics.

The human as embedded in reading practices

There is no way that we can think of the environment without situating it in relation with the human. In Spahr's theorization everything is always already embedded in reading and writing practices, in the production of signification. By raising the question, "[w]hat sort of selves literary works influence, encourage or create[…]" (Spahr 2001, 4), Spahr displays her theory of connective reading in an attempt to respond to the dialectic between the particular and the universal, the individual and community. For Spahr, those works which encourage "connection" are the most crucial, seeking to "engage with large, public worlds that are in turn shared with readers" (2001, 4). Reading is a dynamic and "reciprocal" activity, it is

constitutive of the human, and the human is always a collective product. In her view, reading is an act we learn with others, the process is not "natural", it is bound up with exchange, and in its operations a certain sense of community is encouraged. Spahr declares, "I am interested in works that encourage communal readings" (2001, 5). Clearly, the poet aims at exploring the relation between reading and identity, to draw conclusions "on the nature of collectivity" (2001, 5).

For Spahr, close reading is a form of ethical responsibility. The poet is totally aware that reading moves us to an identification with alterity—with a wide range of social and cultural individuals and locations—which transcends differences. This practice of reading provides a methodological stance which Gayatri C. Spivak, drawing from Jacques Derrida's notion of "teleopoesis" (in his *Politics of Friendship* [1994] 2005), defines as follows: "[teleopoesis] effects shocks to the idea of belonging, to affect the distant in a *poesis*—an imaginative making—without guarantees" and it ends up "revers[ing]" the values of belonging (Spivak 2003, 31). In this chapter, I am methodologically indebted to both Spahr and Spivak in the emphasis they place on connection and on identification with radical alterity. Proximity and distance (telos-) operate simultaneously in any enriching and transformative reading practice.

As a poet, as an academic and intellectual, Spahr is far from occupying a detached, ivory tower position, and her engagement and interaction within what she herself calls the public and cultural sphere (Spahr 2001, 5) is remarkable. In many ways, a poet should never do away with difference, singularity, particularities and rather be very attentive to "how individual identities negotiate within collectivities" (2001, 6).

In Spahr's view, reading is a communal activity, essentially connective. Reading is shareable, it is always reciprocal, and in the moments when this exchange takes place, a specific value of its own is created. In her experience, Spahr argues that parallel to this emphasis on *communitas*,[3] a literature addressing gender, ethnicity and race arises.

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[3] It was anthropologist Victor Turner who first defined the notion of *communitas*. In his view, both *communitas* and liminality are components of social structure and antistructure (Turner [1969] 1977). In the case of *communitas*, all members of a community are equally sharing some experiences; this usually takes place through the common ceremony of the rites of passage. To date, there is an important philosophical literature on *communitas*, from Maurice Blanchot (*The Unavowable Community*, 1983) to Jean-Luc Nancy (*The Inoperative Community*, 1983), Giorgio

In several aspects of the following reading, I am informed by Charles Altieri's views for a rhetorical turn in contemporary American poetry which, in his view, stems from poetry's urge to produce effects in the social and to push readers to act (Altieri 2011), and by theorizations by Ellen Rooney (1989); but also by Juliana Spahr herself (2001) in her anti-pluralist poetics as a major response to the fake gesture of potential inclusion for all upon which the ethos of Western democracies rests. Rooney critiques pluralism as an ideological system based upon the idea of a transnational community in which all are equal and negotiate using rhetoric and every discursive means at hand. In her view, through a process of (Althusserian) ideological interpellation, an individual, "produces a particular kind of reading and writing subject. The subject of pluralism assumes an infinitely persuadable (general) audience" (Rooney 1989, 53). The opposite is far less "socially-friendly" since anti-pluralist trends and practices construct readers as interested and partial—on the opposite side, there would be unbiased readers, likely to be persuaded—in their endeavour to encourage antagonism and struggle rather than consensus. Between pluralist and anti-pluralist positions, one can certainly locate antagonism. In recent US history, Rooney names Marxism and Feminism as two bodies of thinking which are tacitly excluded from the social arena, and paradoxically represent some of the most important critical trends with potential to resist liberal democratic political structuring. Juliana Spahr's poetics engages the collective and its capacities for autonomous and direct action. She relies on the rationale and the principles of self-government at the basis of current social justice movements—such as Occupy Wall Street. Spahr took part in the original demonstrations of the 2011 New York Occupy Wall Street movement—where the "universal" and the "particular" co-exist, and where Western white middle-class human subjectivity's centrality is also displaced to make room for those "others" of history, including all life forms in the planet.

In this sense, regarding the centrality of the historical narrative for humanity, and the rather inconspicuous role the environment has played through the ages in comparison, it is legitimate to raise questions, such as what is it that the

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Agamben (*The Coming Community*, 1990) and Roberto Esposito (*Communitas*, 1998). In my view, Juliana Spahr's contribution, from a literary and critical theory domain, is central for any current consideration on the importance of collectivity and community in reading practices and in the area of audience research.

mere contemplation of the environment produces in us, humans? And why do we keep on reading it along the lines of the Romantics and the canonical tradition? In our present order of knowledge, the West has produced and reproduced the idea that nature comes before culture. In other words, we abide by a series of "bio-centric" codes to preserve the order of the West. Nevertheless, we are not biological beings that create culture, humans come into being simultaneously with culture. What makes humans human is that we are evolutionarily prepared to write (make inscriptions on a surface in order to communicate something), a feature which shows an adaptive response to our ecological and geopolitical environment. Within the nature-culture divide, scholars in anthropology and the social sciences, intellectuals, writers and artists see these two domains as more intertwined than ever before.[4] Juliana Spahr sets herself up to bridge the gap between both of them drawing attention to the "local" nature of the culture of the West. If, as it has been argued, one is ready to take the "descriptive statement of the human on the biocentric model of a natural organism", one should also be very aware "that it is itself, a culture-specific descriptive statement" (Wynter 2003, 267 2).

Reading *Well Then There Now* (2011)

Well Then There Now is a multi-genre collection, in which Juliana Spahr speaks to us in innovative ways with the proximity and the distance that a poet and academic talks to an audience whose complicity and attunement to her social and personal sensitivity is required. Readers are told this miscellaneous collection, cohesive in intent and generously open as regards form and content, consists of nine pieces of prior published work, mostly in literary journals. It comes from disparate sources, locations, and inspiration. Written and published under a variety of different circumstances, it responds to Spahr's nomadic existence, and to her engagement in writing activities with many audiences. Part of these materials was self-published, part was published in journals, section five ("Things of Each Possible Relation Hashing Against One Another") first appeared as a chapbook,

[4] One of the most recent developments in critiquing the nature-culture divide are the New Materialisms and critical post-humanism studies. Among its major representatives Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Jason Moore and Rosi Braidotti, have engaged since the 1990s in supporting some sort of paradigm shift within the Social and Natural Sciences. See esp. Coole and Frost (2010).

other sections were placed on websites, or designed for writing workshops. Spahr's continued movement from inland US to Hawaii[5] has been primordial in her becoming the writer she is now, and in the development of her mature thinking about her engagement with the world at large, her active and activist responses to capitalism, decolonial theory, deep ecological awareness and ethical stance.

We can locate the origin of this collection in Spahr's two previous writing ventures, namely, her critical essay *Everybody's Autonomy. Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (2001) and her important fictional-cum-autobiographical account, *The Transformation* (2007). Spahr has been an advocate for writers and poets' special engagement with the communities and exchanges that poetry facilitates. This should be of prior importance to any consideration on audiences' understanding the ways in which literature might be resistant or revolutionary. In her view, when critically assessing the poetry which comes out of "places of activist anticolonialism" as, for instance, the kind of poetry she was exposed to in Hawaii as an observer-participant in anti-colonialist protests, in which "the genre's assumed shortness, its lack of rules and structures, and its links to orality made it a genre of populist protest" (2007, 81), one should be ready to shift the focus from "how […] poetry was made" to "what it made […] its resonances in the world" (2007, 82). Spahr's penchant for introducing alternatives for understanding the radical matter of poetry takes her to intervene not only seeking radicality in her subversion of the materiality of language, but also in the specific material conditions and structural inequalities out of which these poetries develop.

One should not forget that Spahr's poetics takes up the legacy of Language poetry, and on top of that, the principles that inform ecopoetry constitute an important added strand which encourages a key element of interconnectivity. This fluid inter-connectedness among people, heritages, common lore, institutional sites which make them possible, and the environment which preserves these relations, are part and parcel of a shared economy of co-habitation and care. Jonathan Skinner in his essay "Why Eco-poetics?" (2001) emphasizes the

[5] In *The Transformation*, Spahr writes on her move to University of Hawaii from SUNY Buffalo, and on how this shifted her poetic perspective: "In graduate school they had been taught a map of poetry that had the avant-garde squaring off at the borders against various national literary conventions. But when they got to the island in the middle of the Pacific and looked at the poetry that surrounded them they realized that this map of poetry that they had been taught in graduate school no longer made sense and they had to make new maps" (2007, 80).

extension and impact of ecological thinking beyond the most immediate environmental concerns moving towards a practice of research and writing which is sensitive to different sites where both confluences and boundaries coexist. Linda Russo, in turn, speaks of eco-poetry as "emplaced or environed writing" (Russo 2008, n.pag.) which is not only sensitive to geographical location but rather takes up both the natural world and the language of poetry as frames and facilitators for the intelligibility of that place,

> […] emplaced or environed writing requires attending to bioregions and regions of thought that lie beyond my immediate scope—to use a visual metaphor […]. From where the writer is, she must attempt to complicate that place: understand what it was, how it got to be, how it is being actuated, and what it might be […]. In an ecopoetical practice that considers material and linguistic emplacement (or how we situate language as framing 'tool,' to use [Lawrence] Buell's term) environment and language and poet are ineluctable presences. (Russo 2008, n.pag.)

Russo expands our understanding of ecopoetics as a reflection upon human interaction within the planet. Poet Lisa Robertson's interest in what she calls the "post-pastoral" forms demonstrates her proximity to the concerns of ecopoetics through her critique of the use and abuse of the idea of "nature" in literature throughout the centuries,

> I begin with the premise that pastoral, as a literary genre, is obsolete—originally obsolete. Once a hokey territory sussed out by hayseed diction, now the mawkish artificiality of the pastoral poem's constructed surface has settled down to a backyard expressivity. In the postpastoral poem (in evidence since the English romantics and their modernist successors) the evocation of "feeling" in poet or reader obeys a parallel planting of 'nature' in the poem […] I'd call pastoral the nation-making genre: within a hothouse language we force the myth of the land to act as both political resource and mystic origin. (Robertson 2002, 22-23)

Robertson objects to granting the pastoral a hegemonic position among the genres to, in its turn, understanding nature as a some sort of structural container for the construction of alterity (race, class, location, time) throughout History. Pastoral poetry represents a collection of oppressive protocols complicit with power and repression. In this sense, the poet's scrutiny into any form of social complacency with histories of oppression and plunder, explicitly addressed in *The Transformation*, is certainly a major instance of thinking along the lines of the problematization that post-pastoralism brings about from modernism onwards. At present, the continuation of the pastoral into the post-pastoral and then, eco-poetry, meditates upon recent transformations in our current technologically-

mediated world and incorporates the interdisciplinary concerns of ecology and human/non-human relationships.

"Some of We and the Land that was never Ours"

Well Then There Now opens with a beautiful poetic sequence entitled "Some of We and the Land that was never Ours", in which Spahr's ruminations on the conditions of a nomadic existence, in transit between America and Europe, finds its climatic moment in issues regarding land and deracination, eating and being fed, and speaking and the idea of change. This highly experimental poem uses repetition or insistence, as Gertrude Stein would put it,[6] to emphasize a series of motifs related to nature, and the interconnection between humans, animals and fruits. The poem exhibits an incantatory rhythm built upon syntagmatic repetition of crucial elements which add to the poem's multifarious meaning potential.

Spahr's problematization of the first-person plural, "We", points to the group, a collectivity in which the speaker is also subsumed, but "We" is preferred and "us" is never mentioned. The personal object pronoun form "us" used regularly after a preposition or a verb does not appear at all. This, I suggest, is part of Spahr's method as addressed in this paper's above section. As a legacy of the poet's ideas in her volume *Everybody's Autonomy* (2001), the "collective attention to the multiple" (2001, 13) is prior to any other tenet for reading, "an attention to the diversity of response in the name of individual rights" (2001, 13). Spahr's work gravitates around what she calls reading connective moments (2001, 14), and those moments are presided over by autonomous subjects who could never be considered either as mere members of the "crowd" or understood as objects.

As far as method is concerned, this poem is situated at the crossroads between early avant-garde experiments such as the Surrealists' *cadavre exquis* and post-language poetry developments. "Some of We…", a crucial instance of Sphar's experimental method, was constructed upon memories jotted down from a trip to France, which were technologically operated, "I came home and used a translation machine to push my notes back and forth between French and English until a different sort of English came out: this poem" (2011, 15). Our poet discloses her

[6] Stein writes "[t]here is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be" (1935, 166).

method on a note appended at the end of her poetic sequence. This machine-operated poem, originally a collection of thoughts and notes out of which Spahr tries to make sense of the work of memory—"I was just trying to figure out this day" (2011, 15)—offers readers first-hand insight into her crafting of poems.

Spahr's emphasis on collectivity, interconnection and vast multispecies interdependence shows in every page. The poem opens as follows:

> 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 in this world. We are together. We are together. And some of we are eating grapes. Some of we are all eating grapes. (2011, 11)

The poem progresses along recurrences of elements such as: the collective "we", the idea of "togetherness (in the world)", "eating grapes", the importance of planting (seeds) on the land to feed people, the sharing of the land with the animal kingdom—such as the sparrows, in our poem—and differences in living and nourishment habits of different species. The poem's concern with the land and sustainability of resources for the continuation of life is most central.

> But we were made by the ground, by the grapes. We ate the sheets of the ground. But we were made by the ground, by the grapes. Grapes of the ground. Some of we planted grapes. Green of the ground. Some of we were to settle. Some of we were to arrange. And the land was never ours. (2011, 12)

A crucial concern for the poet is to secure visibility for those who were always dispossessed of the land, be it humans or animals. The land figures thus not only as nourishing agency, but certainly as the common ground shared by all living beings, a rich repository of food and resources for life to continue, the basis for interspecies co-habitation in a fair distribution of space and goods, a wellspring always ready-to-fulfill needs, the common ground for bio-diversity and a site for the humans to settle down. In Spahr's deep ecological-political thinking, one of the basic laws of nature, namely that energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it can be transformed, translates into the biological cycle and reads, "[a]nd 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 the ground let some of us eat" (2011, 12). Certainly, the life cycle and the exceedingly bountiful gifts of Nature have nothing to do with the dictates of capitalism, and they are opposite to the principles of Economics, based upon scarcity and inequality. As Spahr states, "[b]ut the ground was never sure with us […]. Never to be owned. Never to be had. And the land's green is the

land's owning of us. And the green of the ground is the possession of the ground of us" (2011, 12).

One of the interesting motifs the poet frequently uses is that of "eating", being fed or providing nourishment. The importance of eating amounts as much as that of seeds, first planted, or simply thrown onto the land, and after the subsequent cultivation process is completed, transformed into essentials for subsistence. Clearly eating is the first human need, and this is something we share with the animal kingdom. In the poem, Spahr addresses "the small ones" (2011, 11 and ff.) alluding both to humans and birds, specifically sparrows. Both humans and sparrows eat "grapes", and whereas humans eat, sparrows "peck": "We are all in this world, this world of hands and grain together. We all the small ones are in this world, this world of the hands and grain, together. Some of us are sparrows pecking at our hand" (2011, 13).

Spahr emphasizes the condition of all living beings, in an effort to identify needs, and to share what is available. Many of those beings have been dispossessed of their habitats, and many humans suffer dispossession from the land. The poem's last section dwells upon change, and making change possible,

> We all the small ones are together in this world. To eat the grapes and not to plant the seed […]. To change. To change. To make the change. To make the change […]. To we are all in this world together yet still some of we are eating grapes, others pecking at the hand. (2011, 14)

The poem's metaphorical leap takes readers to a scenario in which inequality and the difficulties of subsistence under capitalism are endemic in the world today. While some enjoy the comfort and advantages of the first world, others have been deprived of their much valued "autonomy" and depend on the big economies and former colonial powers for survival.

"Sonnets"

"Sonnets", the second section of this volume, consists of a series of ten fourteen-line lyrics, which either exhibit throughout the collective plural "we", or avoid the speaking position altogether. This chapter exhibits four left-hand side pages, listing in sonnet form, a thorough analysis of the different components in a sample of blood. Structurally, the pages facing these "medical" poems feature a very different register and type of enunciation. The first and last poem of this sequence narrate the arrival of an unknown "we" to a place in the middle of nowhere—Hawaii—

apparently with no connection whatsoever to them. A set of grammatical devices—prepositions, conjunctions, markers—proliferate "defamiliarizing" the relation between subjects and predicates:

> A catalogue of the individual and a catalogue of us with all.
>
> A catalogue of full of thought.
>
> A house where we with all our complexities lie.
>
> A catalogue of blood.
>
> A catalogue of us with all our complexities.
>
> A catalogue of how we are all full of thought and connection.
>
> The house where we are from and the house where we live.
>
> All things to be said more largely than the personal way. (2011, 25)

Parts of the sequence juxtapose sets of lyrics listing the vital components that sustain human life—blood—with others which emphasize the complexity of all living beings, the importance of preserving the personal in the midst of community, the centrality of the idea of home, the discourse of confession, diversity in language, and the particularities of interconnectedness in Hawaii.

Spahr manages to use the technique of cataloguing, to assist in her comprehensive impulse to embrace reality. Framed by a poetic structure in which displacement and migration are foregrounded, the central exchange between statistics, big data (as processed for human use) and naming, and operating linguistically upon a disorderly and chaotic reality, discloses a formidable experiment in conveying a political-cum-scientific message about how "[t]hings should be said more largely than the personal way" (2011, 23). The first and last composition allude to a subject—a "We"—identified with very few biographical details, "[w]e arrived by air by 747 and DC10 and L1011. / We arrived over the islands and we saw the green of them / out of the window […]. We grew into it but with complicities and assumptions / and languages / and kiawe and koa haole and mongooses" (2011, 19). The central poems always refer to a pluralized subject with whom readers may potentially interact and "become" responsive to, "[w]e are full of thought and we are different. / For which things so several / […] The catalogue of force and animal life. / The catalogue of the extension of life, the

operation, and the animal" (2011, 21). Human and animal life partake of the same ethos and remain interconnected.

One cannot argue that in her sonnet sequence Spahr is oblivious of social issues such as inequality, dispossession and a sense of belonging. In her emotionally-ridden social landscape, homelessness and lack of access to the land are coextensive with the condition of the colonized,

> There is in the thought of home.
>
> Those who had a home.
>
> Those who have a right to a home.
>
> And there is those who took and those who stayed in the taking. (2011, 25)

Once again, the sense of collectivity is foregrounded, and the poetic voice claims for inclusivity, community and empowerment, "[w]ho authorizes so one is not single. / Who empowers so one is not alone / Who is various" (2011, 27). In the last composition, Spahr goes back to the idea of land deprivation, focusing poignantly on the attachment to the land of the native population and those who came to settle from afar,

> [b]ut because we were bunkered, the place was never ours, could / never be really ours, because we were bunkered from what / mattered, growing and flowing into, and because we could not / begin to understand that this place was not ours until we grew and flowed into something other than what we were we / continued to make things worse for this place of growing / and flowing into even while some of us came to love it and let / it grow in our own hearts, flow in our own blood. (2011, 29)

Charles Altieri argues that Spahr's sense of inclusivity "builds Whitmanian expansiveness out of Steinian repetition" (Altieri 2011, 134). In my view, the poet's permanent forms of address to a larger-than-existence entity result into a drive toward the abstract and non-quantifiable human and the worldly, and make the human and its local/ethical specificities readable. Spahr is also aware that any attempt at giving a totalizing account of "we with all our complexities" is bound to failure. In this sequence, the sonnet form, traditionally the poetic frame for the expression of interiority par excellence is adapted to combine the personal and the collective, thus expanding the scope of the lyrical, the confessional, the reflective-meditative, the spatio-temporal, and their share in sociality.

"Unnamed Dragonfly Species"

The fifth section in *Well Then There Now* is entitled "Unnamed Dragonfly Species". It consists of a series of paragraphs of unequal length and diverse typescript which express concern for the question of climate change and its global impact on the ecosystems of animals and humans and the heavy toll this is taking on the planet. All paragraphs finally gather in a choral message, conveyed by several voices. By means of a pattern of insistence and repetition in which a third person plural "They" introduces the views of the collective, this narrative offers an account in which declarative and factual events combine with an alphabetical list in the names of "endangered, threatened and special concern plant, fish, and wildlife species of New York State" ("Acknowledgements and other information" section, n.p.). The alphabetical list is singled out to accompany Spahr's acute critique of the current state of affairs regarding animal species on the verge of extinction due to the global warming crisis and, the rising sea levels, the melting of the Arctic, the continuing retreat of the glaciers, and extreme weather conditions.

The alphabetized list includes a good number of names of species whose creatures have been displaced and now appear as deprived of their original habitats. Spahr gathers information coming from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation website as a reliable source that speaks to us about those species that surely will have no place in the ecosystems affected by this unprecedented phenomenon of climate change.

> Sometimes they thought that glaciers interested them because glaciers are like zombies: slow moving and full of stuff, full of stuff and can't be stopped. Seabeach Amaranth Like how in movies you can put a bunch of knives and bullets in a zombie and it keeps on moving. Seaside Sparrow That is how they thought of glaciers. Sedge Wren Sei Whale They move and no one can stop them whichever way they go. Sharp-skinned Hawk You can't pin them down and hold them in place. Short-eared Owl Nor can you deter them when they start moving. Shortnose Sturgeon And they have history. (2011, 90)

It is possibly the actual "melting" of the Arctic and the impact of global warming on glaciers—moving dramatically at a relatively high-speed pace—which is most visible and a matter of great concern with devastating effects. Spahr exhibits simultaneously the richness of a wide variety of species, situated strategically, interrupting a narrative where the mere facts speak for themselves. The text opens with the raw reality of increasing temperatures damaging, and decimating daffodils in full bloom,

> The city of Rotterdam sent over daffodils. **A Noctuid 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** (2011, 75)

The text makes clear that climate change is a global phenomenon, and travels through various geographies testifying to what this state of emergency is triggering globally. From Europe and the Netherlands, where the daffodils die due to the rise of temperatures, to glaciers in Antarctica (2011, 76).

Spahr launches a series of poignant questions with no immediate or direct answer. Regarding the cracking and breaking off of glaciers in Antarctica, the concern for the local fauna is evident in her queries: "[W]hat was it like to be there on the piece that was breaking off. Cerulean Warbler Did waves form? Checkered White Was there a tsunami? Chittenango Ovate Amber Snail What had it been like for the penguins or the fish? Clubshell" (2011, 77).

The text moves between simple constructions—"They learned that all this melting began to accelerate in 1988" (2011, 79)—and complex and convoluted syntactic constructions that aim at diverting attention from ecological disaster. At this point, the lists are interrupted, and relevant, dramatic information is included, only to reappear and continue denouncing climate change irreversible effects,

> **Eskimo Curlew** They could not even remember thinking at all about the weather that year. **Extra Striped Snaketail** When they really thought about it, they had no memory of any year being any hotter than any other year in general. **Fat Pocketbook** They remembered a few hot summers and a few mild winters […]. (2011, 80)

The poem's allusion to an "unnamed dragonfly species" reminds readers that these lists are acts of naming that give visibility to species and realities that otherwise pass unnoticed, as invisible as the changes in the environment we are told through the news, internet, and various reports of journalists, friends and people sensitive to these major and definitive changes. Spahr's typographic technique opposes two major sections of discourse: the impersonal alphabetized names of endangered species in bold face, and the other "chunks" of text which perform a certain diegetic function. Also, this section shares the pronominal pronouns "we" and "they" with all other sections included in this volume. The speakers are part of a plural, collective voice which conveys memories, concerns, information and insight

into the situation of and environmental and human crisis constantly lurking in the dark.

In this piece, 1988 marks a somber beginning for the acceleration of climate change, and the text warns progressively of the dangers of this unprecedented collapse and decay to which extractive capitalism is leading the world. Spahr questions the boundaries between "they" and "the others", between participants in western industrialized societies' exchange, commerce and consumption, and those who suffer the consequences of indiscriminate and toxic production and waste. The increase in the surface temperature of the planet, the melting of the polar ice caps, the rise of ocean levels, plus the dramatic effects this global warming has on vegetation, animals and humans, is foregrounded and denounced. Spahr urges readers to take full responsibility for their actions, and to be aware of their complicity with the big economies which provide them with commodities and comfort while destroying the planet. Finally, Spahr's emphasis on relatedness, connections and interdependence shows again on the last lines of this composition,

> [t]he 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 Lampmussel 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 connected and so immediate to what was happening. Whip-poor-will They knew this but didn't know what else to do. (2011, 93)

Clearly, the dramatic effects of humanity on the planet and the huge impact of the Anthropocene, have brought about irreversible changes. The subsequent industrial, technological and digital revolutions and their profound transformative potential have proved to be no longer life enhancing, they have rather become harmful and destructive. Spahr knows well that an engaged writer and intellectual cannot shy away from her responsibilities to amend a seriously damaged world.

The Political and the Personal: "Gentle Now, don't add to heartache"

"Gentle Now…" is the penultimate section in *Well Then There Now*. The poem is divided in five sections of unequal length, and it serves Spahr's meditative stance toward what humans receive from nature and what, due to the greediness and exploitation of natural resources, we irretrievably lose with dramatic consequences for the planet. Spahr, a poet with a special sensitivity to ecological

catastrophe and environmental grief, becomes also a green activist in her analysis of how natural degradation puts all living matter at risk.

In this poem, Spahr continues her exploration on the first person plural personal pronoun "We", a discursive intervention which obliterates the first person singular up to the fifth section, where it reappears and takes up the responsibilities of an engaged participant in the current stage of environmental and socio-political crisis.

The poem opens with a prelapsarian moment of plenitude in which humanity and nature are in harmony with each other:

> We come in to 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 […]
>
> 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. (2011, 124)

Humans and nature interact, and the poem moves to Section II where the unnamed stream she speaks about qualifies as one of the streams she used to watch in Chillicothe, Ohio, where the poet grew up. The readers face an unpretentious natural landscape where the stream, the fauna and flora of its surroundings are captured with the keen eyes of childhood, and represented unromantically. Nature in a mid-Western middle-class town has nothing to do with the vision and idea of Nature described by English Romantic poetry. It is neither sufficiently beautiful nor inspirational, the Romantics' encounter with the sublime and their reactions expressing awe, veneration and shock is far from this humble scenario.

The poet provides a detailed description of the scene, emotionally charged with feelings of empathy and familiarity: "We loved the stream./ And we were of the stream. / And we couldn't help this love because we arrived at the bank of the / stream and we began breathing and the stream was various and full of information[…]" (2011, 125). This empathy is expanded further in Section III where the "Gentle now..." refrain is introduced. This section is extremely site-

specific, and the catalogue technique is used as an all-inclusive device to create a space for the containment of this microcosm. In any event the poet's intervention in archiving and listing the proper names of much of the fauna in the area does not necessarily mean that a certain fixed order is imposed, rather these listings are on and off interrupted by the second part of the refrain "don't add to heartache". Tensions between order and disorder, also demonstrate the existing hiatus between the natural and the "scientific" human which comes to us as a result of "progress". Diane Chisholm argues for the importance of the refrain in the tradition of American pastoralism, "[w]ith her refrain Spahr composes a minor territory within American pastoralism where the lyrics of visionary democracy continue to beat from Walt Whitman to Gary Snyder" (Chisholm 2014, 131).

Section IV addresses the industrial and agricultural pollution of that stream, and the loss of wildlife and severe disconnection produced by these losses,

> We let in soda cans and we let in cigarette butts […]
> We let in various other pieces of plastic that would travel through
> The stream.
> And some of it unknowingly.
> We let the run off from agriculture, surface mines, forestry, home
> Wastewater treatment systems, construction sites, urban yards,
> And roadways into our hearts. (2011, 131)

Finally, Section V laments the loss of connections with nature as we grow older. Readers realize they do not even find the time to say farewell to the realities stored in our memories, and they are finally erased. The poem shifts from the collective to the individual, and the first-person pronoun singular "I" closes the sequence "I did not sing o wo, wo, wo! / I did not sing I see, I see. / I did not sing wo, wo!" (2011, 133). In Kimberly Lamm's view, "Spahr develops an ethical vision that emerges from the fragile space between a detached and inflexible cultural symbolic and a supple imaginary that testifies to the need for connection" (Lamm 2007, 142). Clearly, the space for the collective human and the multiple world of nature as populated by all living creatures, the space for commonalities and differences is central in Spahr's work. The transformative power which emanates from interaction, balanced distribution of power, respect for human and species' rights

and conservation of resources with a sustainable future in mind is foregrounded throughout Spahr's important trajectory as an intellectual and an activist.

Conclusion

Spahr's work is political and both her essays and her poetry provide a reading space for democratic engagement in acts of collective response to authority. She addresses issues such as globalization, environmental hazards, economic (neo)imperialism and neoliberalism among others. Her distinctive plural pronominal speakers manifest a certain political orientation in making themselves heard; they pursue the potential for difference and distinctiveness within their groups, and convey their messages across a variety of genres represented in the multimodal discourses gathered in *Well Then There Now*, where a miscellaneous collection of prose and poetry modalities interpellate the reader.

In the continuation of a poetry of political and ecological awareness, critics agree that "the twenty-first century's most pressing problem will be the sustainability of the Earth's environment, and that the responsibility for addressing this problem, will increasingly be seen as the responsibility of *all* the human sciences" (Buell 1999, 699), and not just of specialized disciplinary knowledge like that of ecology, law, or public policy. Thus, the question of genre comes into play to discuss which literary forms can make this possible. The trajectory of the pastoral, together with recent developments, like Spahr's post-language poetry informed compositions, contribute to dynamize reflection and debate within this socio-poetical scenario. Spahr's poems consist of concrete localities and the risks, fellowships and efforts of the human experience meant to restore nature as a home fit for the co-habitation of all living species.

In Spahr's poetry, nonlinearity, fragmentariness, repetition, serial form, together with focused attention and her sustained experimentation with personal pronouns, forms of address and the imbrication of the political and the personal, are crucial features of her "style". Hers is a praxis of attuning every reading to every extra textual implications of her texts. Spahr grants special attention to interaction and exchange in discourse while she is very aware that language, by nature, in its double articulation must be understood as a set of practices which are always already both rhetorical and political. In her long and successful career

as a poet, a professor, an activist and an engaged intellectual, Spahr's involvement with current challenges and problems both in the US and the world at large has been exemplary. She would probably agree with many of her readers if we hold that literature is a pedagogical discipline which has major effects in fostering critical thinking, in the advocacy for freedom and respect for human and environmental diversity, in fleeing from a single vision or way of thinking and celebrating difference, tolerance and an ethics of sharing and response-able practice. If we were to raise the question of how poets instill environmental awareness and even activism in readers at present, we certainly would have to count upon Juliana Spahr's attention to the rich and diverse collective within.

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