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Relations and Divisions in Juliana Spahr's *Well Then There Now*

Well Then There Now, by Juliana Spahr. Boston, MA: Black Sparrow Books, 2011.

In her latest collection, *Well Then There Now*, Juliana Spahr writes much about nature. However, it would be incorrect to label the work "nature poetry." After one poem in the collection, "Things of Each Possible Relation," Spahr includes a statement about her dissatisfaction with nature poetry, which she sees as existing in isolation: "[E]ven when it got the birds and the plants and the animals right it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat. And it wasn't talking about how the bird, often a bird which had arrived recently from somewhere else, interacted with and changed the larger system of this small part of the world we live in and on." She is invested in ecopoetics, which she defines as "a poetics full of systemic analysis that questions the divisions between nature and culture." *Well Then There Now* consists of eight pieces, a combination of poetry and essays, each focused on the relationships and divisions between nature and culture.

Each piece in the collection is rooted in a specific location as identified by a map and the latitude and longitude of the locale where the piece was written. And while this would seem to place a hyper-local focus on the poems and essays, the reach is much larger, embodying the "think globally, act locally" mentality. Written about a single street in Honolulu and encapsulating its history and its present state, "Dole Street" connects to colonialism, and while Spahr may be looking specifically at Hawai'i, what she has to say about the problems of syncretism can apply to any colonial state where "certain people had to meet the values, languages, and desires of certain others who suddenly arrived because they could not survive otherwise while those who arrived had a choice about whether they would meet the values, languages, and desires of those who were present often gets overlooked." History has often been written from the perspective of the

conquerors and colonizers, but here Spahr gives insight to the historically overlooked. "2199 Kalia Road" is another essay that has a hyper-local subject, a single address (the Halekulani, a hotel in Waikiki), but addresses larger problems involving land issues, specifically the divisions between public and private and how that is controlled.

In the essays, and in the poems too, Spahr shows how messy everything is as she allows herself to think out loud on the page, frequently citing what she was hoping to do ("I tried to think some about public and private in this essay," she writes in "2199 Kalia Road"), questions she has ("I am wondering what calling myself working class covers over," she states in "The Incinerator"), and thoughts that arise but are ultimately censored ("As I write this other stories keep popping up and I keep abandoning them," also from "The Incinerator"). In this way, the work is extremely accessible. The reader is constantly given insight into what Spahr thinks and what she means to say or do in the poem or essay. While this sort of qualifying might be seen as hesitant or hedging in others, it comes across as natural here and provides a portrait of an author who engages large issues and acknowledges the difficulty in doing so as well as her shortcomings and struggle.

The collection moves easily between poem and essay, as both genres lend themselves to meditation and reflection. "The Incinerator," a poem written in five parts, is essay-like in its meditation on class and its extended discussion of Hannah Weiner's "Radcliffe and Guatemalan Women." No matter what genre Spahr is working in, she weaves many pieces together. "Each morning, as I tried to develop a multi-eyed focus, I would sit down at my desk and go into a trance and write down whatever came up," she writes in "The Incinerator." And in the poem "Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache," she writes, "This is where we learned love and where we learned depth and where we learned layers and where we learned connections between layers." The pieces throughout the collection are full of layers and connections, using this "multi-eyed focus," which should come as no surprise for people who have come to know Spahr's work over the years. However, this familiarity in themes does not make the work any less exciting or less vital. Beginning with her earliest works, Spahr has established a distinct voice and style, using heavy repetition and the first person plural pronouns of "we" and "us," and she continues to employ those tactics here. The emphatic repetition has been compared to Gertrude Stein; however, Spahr's innovation embodied in the emotional aspect of her work and the level of engagement with her environment, which makes this style very much her own.

One highlight of the collection is the poem "Unnamed Dragonfly

Species," whose prose blocks are interrupted by the names of animals, fish, and insects, many of which appear on endangered species lists. Meanwhile, the prose obsesses over melting glaciers, specifically the Antarctic Pine Island glacier. An unidentified "they" become obsessed with the glacier splitting, watching an animation of it over and over on the internet. They come to learn 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":

They had been alive in 1988. **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 but they were more likely to remember certain specific storms like the blizzard of 1976. **Fence Lizard** They did not remember heat as glaciers remember heat, deep in the center, causing cracking or erupting.

Later in the poem, Spahr writes, "They made no claim to answers they just noticed things." The poem explores the complexity of climate change: "And even if they tried to live their lives with less stuff than others, they still benefited and were part of a system that produced all this stuff and because of this they had a hard time figuring out how to move beyond their own personal renewed commitment to denial of stuff and yet awareness of how they benefited daily from being a part of a system that used up the most stuff." The connection between things that is often celebrated here is rendered tragic. At the end of the poem, all "they" can do is go on "living while talking loudly . . . Living and watching on a screen things far away from them melting." The poem successfully captures the anxiety many environmentalists are likely to feel in this day and age—the overwhelming sense that things are damaged beyond repair, that reducing one's own carbon footprint may not do much in the grand scheme of things, that, despite all of this, one must continue living and talking loudly.

Well Then There Now is another strong collection from Spahr and another important contribution to the growing literature of ecopoetics. In his introduction to the first issue of the seminal journal *ecopoetics*, editor Jonathan Skinner defines ecopoetics as "a house making"—a combination of "eco," our planet Earth, "the house we share with several million other species," and "poetics," "used as *poesis* or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative act (or vice

versa)." As demonstrated in *Well Then There Now* and her previous collections, Spahr is certainly in the industry of house making. Her thoughtfulness and sense of the complexity of issues should resonate with anyone who is eco- and politically conscious, and perhaps if put into the right hands, it can do the work of raising awareness for those who have not given much thought to the world and their own place within it.