Imagining a Mobile Sense of Place: Towards an Ecopoetics of Mobility

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ABSTRACT

This essay starts out from the observation that in American literature there is a growing body of environmentally significant poems that are invested both in place and geographical movement. Because their green resonances are not so much compromised as they are productively complicated and intensified by this double-orientation, such poems challenge all-too-stable notions of place and place-connectedness as ecological ideals, from the perspectives of a genre that is uniquely suited to transcend place and time without necessarily relinquishing literature’s referential dimension. Combining some of the questions asked in recent ecocriticism with the concerns of mobility studies, this essay explores how American poetry engages with the shifting place of human and nonhuman creatures in an increasingly mobile world. Using Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and a spectrum of contemporary poets as examples, the essay argues that such poems, in spite of their notable differences, all engage similar strategies that enable them to envision and express a distinctly mobile sense of place. Most prominent among these interrelated poetic strategies are the evocation of topographies as substantially marked by nonhuman mobility, the focus on personas whose environmental insights are critically informed by their movement, and references to a more broadly mobile culture. This notion of a mobile sense of place lies at the heart of what I call an “ecopoetics of mobility”—an ecologically sensitive mode of poetic expression that conceives of natural phenomena and human-nonhuman interactions as both place-oriented and fundamentally mobile.

“We must travel abreast with Nature if we want to understand her.”
Emily Dickinson

“Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?”
Walt Whitman

“Shortly after I moved to Hawai‘i [I was] suspicious of nature poetry because even 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. […] I saw nature poetry as being in this tradition of isolation.
So during the summer of 2001 I took an ethnobotany course in order to learn otherwise.”
Juliana Spahr

One of the most intriguing developments in recent ecocriticism has been the growing interest in poetry and poetics, with ecopoetics on the verge of becoming one of the field’s new buzzwords. After ecocriticism’s prominent investment in
prose throughout the 1990s, the interest in environmental poetry has consistently picked up speed, leading to the publication of studies as diverse as Jonathan Bate’s reappraisal of romantic poetry in *The Song of the Earth* (2000), Jed Rasula’s post-structuralist *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (2002), David Gilcrest’s ecoethical *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics* (2002), and Scott Knickerbocker’s form-oriented *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (2012). Just as importantly, a growing number of anthologies have begun to unsettle narrow notions of nature poetry as the monolithic, socio-politically irrelevant domain of privileged Westerners. Particularly notable here are *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), the internationally oriented *Earth Shattering: Ecopoems* (2007), and the experimental *Outcrop: Radical Australian Poetry of Land* (2013). Several journals, including *ecopoetics* (2001-2007) and *Written River: A Journal of Ecopoetics* (since 2010), have further increased the visibility of environmental poetry and sparked fresh debates about the links between green criticism and poetic practice. What all of this suggests is that conversations about poetry, rather than occupying a niche, have come to constitute a critical edge within literary studies that interrogates, in Jonathan Skinner’s words, “whether our activities further the well-being of other species on the planet” (Hume 766).

However, in spite of the conceptual and thematic diversity that characterizes current discussions about ecopoetics, little sustained attention has been paid to the ways in which the environmental implications of poetry are inflected and complicated by geographical mobility. This is not only surprising because people’s

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4 Among the few studies on American poetry that point in such a direction are Robert Boschman’s *In the Way of Nature: Ecology and Westward Expansion in the Poetry of Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Bishop and Amy Clampitt* (2009), and Michael Dowdy’s partially ecocritical *Broken Souths: Latina/O Poetic Responses to Neoliberalism and Globalization* (2013).
Intensifying movements within and across national borders are among the defining features of our time, and are increasingly understood in relation to the global environmental crisis; in particular, geographers, political scientists, and historians have discussed the phenomenon of so-called climate refugees for two decades now. The lack of discussions about the links between environmental issues and mobility in poetry is also surprising because there is a notable body of poems that addresses precisely this junction, and does so in historically informed, conceptually complex, and aesthetically innovative ways. One could even argue that in contemporary American environmental poetry, some of the most innovative work keeps coming from writers who are strongly invested in issues of mobility. Consider, for instance, Amy Clampitt’s *Westward* (1990), which reimagines America’s environmental history from the perspective of settler-colonial mobilities, Morton Marcus’s *When People Could Fly* (1997), which links creation myths to memories and dreams of human-nonhuman movements, and the new and selected poems of W.S. Merwin’s *Migration* (2005), which largely revolve around people’s alienation from the other-than-human world. Or think of William Stafford’s *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* (1998) about the effects of walking and driving through familiar regions; Virgil Suárez *90 Miles* (2005) about immigrants’ diverse expressions of a sense of place; and Ed Roberson’s *To See The Earth Before the End of the World* (2010), an epic journey in search of humankind’s place on this planet. In related ways, Sarah Vap’s *Arco Iris* (2012) approaches South American landscapes by addressing the disturbing aspects of travel; Sandra Meek, in *Nomadic Foundations* (2002), *Biogeography* (2006), and *An Ecology of Elsewhere* (2016), thinks about human and nonhuman bodies adrift yet in place between North America and Southern Africa; and the volumes of Craig Santos Perez’s *from Unincorporated Territory, [Hacha]* (2008), *[Saina]* (2010), and *[Guma’]* (2014), talk about Guam’s histories of migration, (military) colonization, and environmental devastation. Indeed, if one looks back over the history of American poetry interested in the natural environment, it turns out that such poems have kept intersecting with questions of travel and exile, migration and exploration at several nodal points—from the works of Chicano/a poets Gloria Anzaldúa, Linda Hogan, and Simon Ortiz, and the Beat poetry of Gary Snyder and Ann Waldman, via Claude McKay’s and Jean Toomer’s great migration poems, all the way to the negotiations between old and new world in the poetry of Ann Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley. In this paper I argue that these poems develop an important idiom for addressing environmental concerns and questions of mobility in tandem, especially when read from the perspective of a cultural moment marked by the convergence of environmental and migratory crises on a global scale. In particular, I hope to demonstrate that the environmental outlook of such poems is informed by their simultaneous attention to geographical mobility to the point of constituting a distinctive paradigm.

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5 Apart from such single-author collections, poems on the intersection between human mobility and environmental concerns can be found in the anthologies of nature, environmental, and ecopoetry mentioned above, and in parallel anthologies of (im)migrant or multicultural poetry.
For such an analysis, a combination of ecocriticism with some of the questions asked in mobility studies seems particularly well suited. The principal concerns of these two fields may appear to be diametrically opposed to one another, yet several aspects of their recent developments make such a crossover highly promising. In early ecocriticism, the focus on place and place-connectedness (cf. Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* 56) went hand in hand with an intense commitment to people’s long-term ties to their immediate surroundings, and to ideals of dwelling and bioregionalism, while geographical movement was seen as a prime adversary of a place-based ecological outlook and practice. As such, areas characterized by mobility were, following Edward Relph and Marc Augé, considered “non-places,” and Lawrence Buell and others insisted that “[a]s scale and mobility expand, placeness tends to thin out” (*Future* 90, 91). Only very recently have ecocritical publications begun to rethink such ideals of platial stability. Regarding the foundational ecological notion of steady-state organic systems, which has shaped Western environmentalism since the nineteenth century, ecocritical studies have responded to disturbance ecologists like Daniel Botkin, who argue that we need to recognize disruptions and movement as part of any ecosystem’s “natural” state (9). At the same time, ecocritics in dialogue with postcolonial and transnational studies have pushed beyond the interest in rural, Euro-American locales and now reexamine imperialism and empire with a focus on environmental justice (see Huggan and Tiffin; DeLoughrey and Handley). Others have discussed constructions of American culture as extraordinarily mobile as a reason for American environmentalism’s fetishization of roots (Heise, *Sense of Place* 48-49), and explore nomadism as conducive of rather than in conflict with bioregional values (Robin; Cenkl). Although most of these investigations focus on prose rather than poetry, they suggest that there is an emergent ecocritical interest in mobility as an environmentally relevant dynamic.

Mobility studies, in turn, understand social phenomena and systems as mobile, asking how movements of “people, resources, and commodities” have been “enabled, shaped and mediated across time and through technological advances,” as the mission statement of *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* puts it. Since such a focus subverts “the role of place as a determining factor of human existence” (Benesch 2), it is perhaps not surprising that environmental issues have been all but marginal to the field. And yet one of mobility studies’ most influential publications, John Urry’s *Mobilities* (2006), points out that “the modern, mobilized world” of traffic, tourism, and financial transactions began when the industrial revolution caused “an awesome ‘mastery’” and “systematical mobilization” of nature (13), and ends with a bleak future scenario in which collapsed structures of mobility are caused by climate change (289). Less tangibly, Stephen

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6 For first-wave ecocriticism’s generally negative view of mobility see, for example, Bate’s influential *Song of the Earth* (3; 7; 14).

7 For a study on ecological (im)balance and disorder in British poetry see Heidi C. M. Scott’s *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (2014); my essay “‘Nothing Stays Put’: Displacement and Environmental Memory in American Poetry” (2015) coins the term “disequilibrium memory” to discuss how migration poetry reimagines seemingly stable environments as defined by disruptions and unrest.
Greenblatt in *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (2009) critiques the assumption that cultures “in their original or natural state […] are properly rooted in the rich soil of blood and land” (Introduction 3), and insists that mobility should be analyzed not just symbolically but also “in a highly literal sense,” together with “the sensation of rootedness” (“Manifesto” 250, 251). However, much like the *Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (2014), which states that “it is difficult to imagine any more pressing ethical question than the effect of mobility on the environment,” none of these publications include concrete analyses of mobility’s environmental significance (Adey 10). Considering that, as Donna Haraway recently put it, “right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge,” a dialogue between ecocriticism and mobility studies seems both necessary and timely, and it promises to provide a productive angle for analyzing a wide array of texts that conceive of place and sense of place as not threatened by or in conflict with, but in many ways constituted by, movement (160).

Because of their formative role in the history of American ecopoetics and, to different degrees, in the history of America’s poetry of mobility, I use Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman as my primary examples here, arguing that both of them link views of the natural world to questions of human and nonhuman movement in such multifaceted, often ambivalent ways that, together, their poems crystallize a modern ecopoetics of mobility. In order to suggest the degrees to which similar modes of addressing this juncture have remained productive well into the twenty-first century, I also discuss the works of various more recent poets, highlighting the notable parallels between their mobile environmental imaginaries. By doing so I do not mean to negate that contemporary poetry is concerned with very different environmental issues and different mobilities, also and especially in terms of scale, nor do I argue that recent American poems, in their often pronounced interest in racial and ethnic differences and critique of globalization, should be understood primarily via Dickinson and Whitman. Rather, the exploration of certain vital connections between these earlier and more contemporary bodies of work can serve as a starting point for discussing a broader tradition of poems that have linked environmental and mobile perspectives. In what follows I argue that in American poetry, one can identify an “ecopoetics of mobility,” a way of poetic world-making that conceives of natural phenomena and human-nature relationships in particular places as both ecologically suggestive and fundamentally geographically mobile. In order to discuss this abstract concept, I focus on expressions of a mobile sense of place as a crucial manifestation of such a mobile ecopoetics.8 This mobile sense of place becomes tangible through three interrelated po-

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8 The phrase “mobile sense of place,” to my knowledge, has only been used by cultural geographer Tim Edensor in his essay “Walking in Rhythms: Place, Regulation, Style and the Flow of Experience” (2010). Edensor discusses how walking involves rhythms that “add to the rhythmic totality of place,” how “[a] mobile sense of place can be produced through longer immersion by the walking body across a more extended space,” and “how regular endeavours such as commuting […] produce a sense of mobile place” (69; 71). Edensor’s work forms a crucial backdrop for my exploration, although he brackets ecological questions and mostly focuses on time and space. Moreover, the mobile sense of place I identify in American poetry does not depend on people’s repetition of certain movements or a longer immersion in place, as Edensor suggests.
etic tactics: the construction of places that are significantly shaped by nonhuman mobilities, of speakers whose environmental insights are critically informed by their geographical movement, and of broader cultural frameworks characterized by overlapping movements of people, materials, goods, and ideas. It is the interplay of these strategies that evokes a multilayered mobile sense of place—a quality whose expression both constitutes and depends on the ecopoetics of mobility I am interested in here.

**Places of Mobility**

One way in which Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, as well as various contemporary poets, express an environmentally sensitive interest in place and mobility is by evoking physical geographies that are characterized by nonhuman movement to such a degree that “natural” mobility becomes a quality of these places themselves. Consider, for instance, Dickinson’s views not only of birds and insects but also of plants as on the move, as in this seemingly innocuous poem from 1860:

As if some little Arctic flower
Upon the polar hem—
Went wandering down the Latitudes
Until it puzzled came
To continents of summer—
To firmaments of sun—
To strange, bright crowds of flowers—
And birds, of foreign tongue!
I say, As if this little flower
To Eden, wandered in—
What then? Why nothing,
Only, your inference therefrom!     (Fr177)

Titled “Transplanted” in the 1890 edition of Dickinson’s poems, it has most often been read as a religious (Gelpi 84; Eberwein 110; Hecht 159) or metapoetic commentary (Heginbotham 21, 143; Smal 70). Closer to my subject here, a few critics have found that the poem refers to Sir Franklin’s failed arctic exhibition (Quinn 73-74), to the “manmade movement of plants” in the context of “exotic” gardens (McDowell 182), or to an Indian Pipe and, possibly, its evolutionary survival “through chance, patience, strength and mystery […] in an alien, Edenic climate” (Hecht 159). Yet the seemingly oxymoronic idea of a “wandering” flower can also be taken to refer to the botanical process of plant migration, the gradual change of habitat in floral species. Such floral movements were first discovered, with regards to the Arctic, in 1859 by Asa Gray, who argued that certain plants involved in such large-scale botanical shifts could still be found in “the mountains of New York and New England” (447). This context underscores how in Dickinson’s poem, the novel idea of plant migration, together with its suggestive symbolism, evokes an unsteady geography that is ecologically meaningful precisely because of its various levels of mobility.
The poem’s very focus on a plant—commonly a metaphor for rootedness—as crossing vast distances already turns mobility into an ecologically relevant quality of place. Through its autonomous movement, this Arctic flower invests the places it has left and passed through as well as its new habitat with the quality of mobility. In such a context the “strangeness” and “foreignness” of the flowers and birds encountered en route not only reflect the perspective of a migrating northern plant traveling southward but also suggest that these creatures may themselves have “wandered” there at some point, further adding to the poem’s ecologically resonant attention to arctic, temperate, and maybe even tropic geographies as informed by mobility. Indeed, if plants are conceivable as mobile, any territory populated by plants is potentially invested with mobility. Considering the speaker’s intense interest in geography—reinstated by markers such as “Arctic,” “polar,” “Latitudes” and “continents”—such imaginative exploration of plant mobility can unsettle this poem’s placeness without completely undoing it.

The use of personification significantly contributes to the poem’s evocation of movement as integral to the ecology of place because it mobilizes the sentimental trope of flower-as-woman. And while the trope of a wandering “Arctic” flower calls up the image of a white middle class woman testing the limits of travel, it also resonates in terms of the time’s intensifying plant and seed trade, in terms of botanical expeditions in the context of empire, and—considering the poem’s references to strangeness and foreignness—also, at least subliminally, in terms of international immigration. The metaphor’s ambiguity suggests that these various implications not only coexist but may even be causally linked, which intensifies the sense that interrelated nonhuman and human, “natural” and anthropogenic movements are inseparable from the character of specific landscapes. In similar ways the rather overt parallel between physical and epistemological movement also adds to the poem’s mobile sense of place, in so far as it undoes the assumption of platial stability on yet another level: The repeated “As if” frames the poem’s guiding interest in plant migration in the language of a thought experiment; parallel constructions beginning with “to” and dashes at the end of so many lines link the movements across continents to the poem’s movement towards fresh ideas; and the tone of childlike wonder, together with a closing couplet that asks a flippant question but withholds the answer, turns the text into a variation of Dickinson’s well-known riddle poems. This seemingly playful meditation on a flower that expands its range, then, talks about geography in ways that conceive of the interrelated movements of plants, people, and ideas as integral to the meaning of place.

Other Dickinson poems similarly “wonder” about plant and seed movements in ways that mobilize the concept of place as environmental category. Some of these poems rethink the common link between the seasons and the cycle of life, death, and resurrection by talking about certain flowers’ shifting geographical range, as for instance “The Daisy follows soft the Sun—” (Fr161) and “Through the Dark Sod” (Fr559). Others call attention to far-travelling winds that “loosen acres” and “leave a Bur at the door” (Fr494), stress how flowers “negotiate” between countries either through trade or as pressed specimens in letters (Fr829), and address the custom of conferring floral “trinkets” which then “journey” as
far as the human traveller, alluding specifically to the Clematis, a popular Asian
garden hybrid sometimes called Traveller’s Joy (Fr628). Together with Dickinson’s numerous poems in which all kinds of animals “leave” and “return,” “flit,” “prance,” “cruise,” and “haul away,” such seemingly innocuous explorations of
botanical unrest revise the popular language of flowers in ways that destabilize
notions of place as a “naturally” fixed realm, expressing an alternative, mobile
sense of place.

Whitman, too, turns to territories whose unexpected levels of nonhuman mo-
bility constitute a critical part of their ecology, as in his signature poem “Out
of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” from 1859. Several ecocritics have praised the
commitment to place expressed here through the boy’s, poet’s, and birds’ strong
ties to Long Island’s shore without, however, addressing its mobile dimensions.9
What subverts traditional concepts of place that emphasize rootedness and stabili-
ity here is the fact that this poem’s birds are two “guests from Alabama.” Mock-
ingbirds, now common in large parts of the United States, were once a Southern
species that slowly extended its geographical range northward. It was right during
Whitman’s time that this shift was increasingly noticed; such discussions were
sometimes linked to debates about the songbird trade, which was so widespread
that it caused a dramatic decline of several bird populations, including mocking-
birds, in parts of the South, while leading to cage escapes in the North. As such,
the poem’s focus on a pair of Southern birds, from a species slowly shifting north-
ward both “naturally” and through human interference, turns mobility into a fea-
ture of New England’s geography, and of place more generally.

Much like Dickinson, Whitman unsettles a whole range of places by focusing
on, in his case, an unusual avian migration. Right in the birds’ first, joint song,
they express a sense of having easily crossed space and time in ways that desta-
bilize the dominant notion that species, including birds, occupy a particular geo-
ographical niche:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Winds blow south, or winds blow north,} \\
\text{Day come white, or night come black,} \\
\text{Home, or rivers and mountains from home,} \\
\text{Singing all time, minding no time} \\
\end{align*}
\]

[LG 208]

Just as these lines do not abandon the idea of “home” but reconceive it as dy-
namic, they do not let go of geography but upset the stability of the place these two
stray birds left, the “rivers and mountains” they crossed, and their new Long Is-
land habitat. Because this radical avian mobility parallels blowing “winds,” South
and North—in U.S., continental, and even global terms—emerge as places shaped
by large-scale “natural” movements. This sense of mobility-informed geographies
is redoubled when the “he-bird” calls for his female mate, who has apparently
moved on but fails to return:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Blow! blow! blow!} \\
\text{Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok’s shore;} \\
\text{I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

9 See Buell, Environmental Imagination 7; Killingsworth, Whitman and the Earth 107, 109;
Handley, New World Poetics 146; Gerhardt, Place for Humility 120.
Hither my love!
Here I am! here! […]
Do not be decoy’d elsewhere […] (LG 208: 210)

Long Island’s shore emerges as a precarious site of a vagrant bird’s impermanent dwelling, and even death, rather than as a familiar landscape populated by local species. If this is one of the central insights of the boy-turned-poet, who begins to see his well-known landscape of home with fresh eyes, the character of any geography becomes conceivable as deeply inflected by creatures who are less place-bound than it seemed.

Echoing Dickinson’s poetic practice in her Arctic flower poem, here, too, the use of personification contributes to this dynamic, this time through subtle revisions of the conventional association between personified bird and poet, birdsong and poetry. This speaker, as he translates the bird’s song into his own, emphasizes that he will follow the bird’s example in becoming an “outsetting,” mobile bard. Of course birds are generically mobile, but poetic birdsong is often invested with regionally or nationally specific meaning linked to the birds’ geographical distribution, as British Romanticism’s infatuation with the lark and nightingale and America’s embrace of the mockingbird as emblematic singer of the New World suggest. Whitman revisits this trope not by unhooking it from place, but by emphasizing the birds’ (and poet’s) mobile connection to place. If birdsong is the starting point of poetry here, with the bird being a poet in his own right and the man assuming identity with it, all this happens with an emphasis on a particular place that is shaped by the bird’s “naturally” mobile ties to it. Such an embrace of avian and, by extension, human mobility far beyond the realms of “home” as integral to place also has subtle political implications at a time in which debates about (im)migration were increasingly dominated by nativist arguments. Finally, this poem, too, suggest a connection between geographical and epistemological mobility that intensifies its overall mobile construction of place. The entire poem is driven by the speaker’s search for a “key” to an unusual natural spectacle, and the answer suggested by the “endlessly rocking” waves provides no closure, keeping the “outsetting” poet forever on the move. The language used to account for this process, especially its opening list of parallel constructions—“Out of,” “Out of,” “Over,” “Down,” “Up from,” and “Out from,” followed by eight more “From’s”—enacts rather than depicts this novel idea of a mobile poetry that emerges from and recreates a mobile (sense of) place.

Other Whitman poems in which an eco-sensitive outlook intersects with a guiding interest in places of unusual “natural” mobility include his landmark “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” whose locale is a river marked by a “current rushing so swiftly and swimming,” and by the constant up and down of “ebb-tide” and “flood-tide,” repeated seven times. The unusually intense mobility of this tidal river is further perpetuated by crossing ferries, “large and small steamers in motion,” and “the swinging motion of the hulls”—human-made movements that merge with those of the “scallop-edged waves,” “frolicsome crests,” and circling seagulls. Such mobility subliminally threatens the integrity of this place at the same time that it defines the river’s essence as place. The poem here expresses a fine sense of mobility’s conflicting ecological implications without decrying geo-
graphical movement as the antithesis of place. As such, the final expression of hope that this place may live on, rather than being undone by ever-accelerating movement, also and especially that of increasing traffic, does in itself lead back to mobility: “Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!” *(LG* 139). Mobility-infused places also figure in Whitman’s “As Consequent, etc.,” which links the idea of forward-flowing poems to a sense of America as a continent of mobility in so far as it is spanned by brooks and their “reticulations,” undermined by “wayward rivulets” and “subterranean sea-rills making for the sea,” and crisscrossed by “Life’s ever-modern rapids” that merge with massive rivers—a place where “abysmic waves” form “currents for starting a continent new” *(LG* 300-01). Taking this dynamic to a global level, “A Song of the Rolling Earth” celebrates the earth as a planet that is sailing through space—mobile yet a place—and inspires a poetry that further perpetuates this globally mobile platiality.

In contemporary poetry, the combined interest in the natural environment and physical movement is expressed through comparable evocations of places whose ecology is profoundly defined by mobility. A strong example comes from Juliana Spahr, whose poem “Things of Each Possible Relation Hashing Against One Another” is part of her 2011 collection *Well Then There Now*. The poem begins with “the view from the sea / the constant motion of claiming, collecting, changing, and taking,” and keeps repeating variations of “constant motion,” “the introduction of plants and animals, others, exotically,” and “the arrival to someplace,” so that the movements of ocean and rivers, flora, fauna, and people, in their interlocking, often non-linear causal relationships, define place itself as mobile arena (55; 56). Read next to Dickinson and Whitman, Spahr’s poem is much more centrally informed by environmental concern and more directly calls attention to the ecological effects of intersecting human-nonhuman mobilities, especially in the framework of postcolonial critique. Yet her lines, too, link environmental and mobile imaginaries in ways that destabilize seemingly steady geographies, as in this passage:

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so there is
the view from land
the firm steadiness of earth
all its plants and all its fresh waters together
the hull of a boat
and then there is its bough and its sail and its movement toward
its movement towards things from somewhere else
the ground
the lack of firm regularity of the ground (65)
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The binary between “the firm steadiness of earth” and “the lack of firm regularity of the ground,” linked here to the binary between native and colonial perspectives, gives way to a sense of not just interwoven but mobility-infused land- and waterscapes, where even the “firm steadiness of earth” consists of “things from somewhere else.” Similarly, the poem’s incessant combination of species, as in “snipe of the plover,” “turnstone of the flycatcher,” and “the wings of the butterfly and the bird,” together with long lists that include plants, animals, factories, as well as “western concepts of government, trade, cash and imposing / the vision
from the track / then the introduction of ant and coconut heart rot,” evoke not only interconnectivity but movement, letting overlapping natural-cultural mobilities shape the character of place (59, 60; 64).

Various other contemporary poems that reimagine the ecology of places by turning to previously unacknowledged “natural” mobilities specifically focus on stray birds. W. S. Merwin’s “Unknown Bird,” for instance, echoes Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle” in its attention to the connections between an unfamiliar birdsong and a seemingly stable landscape (“Out of the dry days / through the dusty leaves / far across the valley,” [497]). Merwin, too, identifies the bird’s voice with his own, yet he adds a postcolonial twist to this trope: by stressing that neither the bird nor the U.S.-American speaker are “native” to the place, by comparing the bird’s song to that of an Oriole heard “years ago in another / existence,” and by wishing to keep the bird’s presence a secret, he links a sense of ecological fragility more explicitly to the precarious situation of migrating creatures, nonhuman or human (498). Equally prominent among recent poems that continue the conversation about places of mobility as integral to a modern environmental imaginary are those about so-called invasive plants. Ranging from Jerome Rothenberg’s “The Bromeliad,” which celebrates a tropical epiphytic plant that grows in “gardens” and “cities” as “great / colonizer” (456), to Amy Clampitt’s “Kudzu Dormant,” about a plant that overgrows the U.S. South’s abandoned places of poverty and decay as “entrepreneur (as most are) / from away off somewhere” but also as “charming strangler” (322), such poems often connect the shifting of plants across regional and national borders to dynamics of colonial expansion and economic exploitation, understanding place as marked by increasingly complex layers of botanical mobility that can no longer be understood apart from human interference, and perhaps never could. With a slight shift of emphasis, poems about (im-)migrant gardens, too, from Vivian Shipley’s “Digging up Peonies” to Carolina Hospital’s “The Gardener,” link reflections on seemingly innocuous practices of cultivation to those about global geographies marked by mobile plants. Finally, a growing number of poems about so-called natural disasters also undo traditional notions of geographical stability. Natasha Trethewey’s Beyond Katrina, which interlinks layers of traumatic environmental unrest in the Mississippi Delta with histories of intense racial and class conflict, is one such example.

Together, all of these poems engage and expand the possibilities of poetic world-making, in geographical as well as sociopolitical terms, by calling attention to the movements of nonhuman creatures and phenomena—often informed by, and indeed inseparable from, human movements—in and through specific territories. Continuing the work of Dickinson and Whitman with different but related means, they think about such mobilities as integral to the ecology of place, reimagining, to use one of Spahr’s suggestive phrases, “the green of the ground” as “the green of the track” (55-56).
Mobile Speakers

Apart from their evocations of physical geographies as mobile realms, Dickinson, Whitman, and many contemporary poets also reimagine place and sense of place in mobile terms by casting human movement as a constitutive element of environmental perception. Let me again begin with Dickinson and Whitman, whose poems share, for all their marked differences, an interest in speakers whose mobility enables ecologically significant insights, concerning specific places as well as the environmental possibilities and limitations of a mobile existence. Regarding Dickinson, another flower poem provides an especially strong example:

\[
\text{It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon—} \\
\text{The Flower—distinct and Red—} \\
\text{I, passing, thought another Noon} \\
\text{Another in its stead} \\
\text{Will equal glow, and thought no More} \\
\text{But came another Day} \\
\text{To find the Species disappeared—} \\
\text{The Same Locality—} \\
\text{The Sun in place—no other fraud} \\
\text{On Nature’s perfect Sum—} \\
\text{Had I but lingered Yesterday—} \\
\text{Was my retrieveless blame—} \\
\text{Much Flowers of this and further Zones} \\
\text{Have perished in my Hands} \\
\text{For seeking its Resemblance—} \\
\text{But unapproached it stands—} \\
\text{The single Flower of the Earth} \\
\text{That I, in passing by} \\
\text{Unconscious was—Great Nature’s Face} \\
\text{Passed infinite by Me—} \quad (\text{Fr843})
\]

Most critics have agreed that this 1864 poem must be concerned with a mysterious symbolic referent because such intense suffering cannot be explained by the loss of a mere flower (see Morris 47). What I would like to stress here is not so much that the poem’s concern over a moment of environmental inattentiveness has ecoethical overtones (Gerhardt, Place for Humility 42-43), but that its environmental implications revolve largely around conflicting interpretations of mobility.

Initially, the speaker’s sincere regret over “passing by” a flower seems to go hand in hand with the indictment of movement as a root cause of such an oversight. This negative connotation of mobility is redoubled when ensuing movements to find the missed specimen elsewhere bring damage rather than the expected results: “Much Flowers of this and further Zones / Have perished in [her] Hands.” And yet the explicit “blame” that “lingering” would have been wiser overlooks the eco-sensitive insights that are gained through this very mobility. It is during a habitual walk that the speaker notices a “distinct” plant; it takes another visit
to realize that it blooms only briefly; and the movements in search for a similar plant reveal that the “Species disappeared,” which resonates in temporal as well as spatial terms, and that none among the “Flowers of this and further Zones” resembles this particular kind. Mobility, then, leads to oversight and insight, damage and concern, with an emphasis on the latter. While the poem is clearly also about time, the language of plant geography (“Species,” “Locality,” “Zones”) keeps it oriented towards “this earth,” opening fresh perspectives on how human and nonhuman mobility give meaning to a place.

“It bloomed and dropt” gains additional environmental poignancy through its revision of the trope of the romantic nature walk, famously exemplified by Wordsworth’s “I Wander’d Lonely as a Cloud.” Where the latter leads from movement to sedentariness, and from material nature to poetic mind in an act of spiritual appropriation, Dickinson’s poem remains dynamically grounded in place—again through the language of plant geography, and through the last stanza’s double insistence on passing “by,” which stresses the platial rather than the temporal axis of such passing. In this nature walk, the movements of the speaker, mirrored by and linked to those of the flower and “Great Nature,” are certainly part of a yearning for transcendence, yet they also come into view as newly understood aspects of what happens on this physical earth. If such a continued concern with geography signifies a failure of transcendence, it also highlights human mobility as crucial to our understanding of the ecology of place.

Among the Dickinson poems that voice a similar interest in human mobility as ambivalent yet crucial element of environmental interaction and perception in place are early pieces like “Within my reach!” (Fr69), whose “sauntering” speaker both resembles “violets” that “within the meadows go” and regrets having strolled there too early to pluck such passing flowers. Also, seemingly naïve poems such as “I Robbed the Woods” (Fr57), whose speaker bears away a forest’s “trinkets,” and “So bashful when I spied her!” (Fr70), whose “passing” speaker returns to carry a “struggling” flower “beyond” its usual place, express, apart from their erotic overtones, concern over the environmental disruptions caused by human exploration. In related ways, Dickinson’s famous snake poems, “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” (Fr1096) and “Sweet is the swamp with its secrets” (Fr1780), talk about elusive creatures in their characteristic environments while negotiating the gendered boundaries of the speaker’s own mobility; “A Burdock – clawed my Gown – ” (Fr289) forms a variation of that theme. In yet another twist, her paradigmatic “What mystery pervades a well!” (Fr1433) evokes the ideal of “pass[ing]” nature’s “haunted house,” and gothic visions of walks along a graveyard (“I often passed the village,” Fr41) or through a night forest (“Through lane it lay - through bramble -,” Fr43) further stretch the boundaries of a classic nature walk yet remain attuned to the lives of nonhuman species in place. Even the well-known “I started early, took my Dog” (Fr656) is at its core about a woman’s walking encounter with a dangerously mobile ocean. Finally, the religious epiphanies in “Escaping backward to perceive” (Fr969) include mobile insights about seemingly stable places as being “undermin[ed]” by fluid elements, while “Could I but ride indefinite” (Fr1056), for all its ambivalence, playfully celebrates a mobile life in place, including its environmental perspectives. The point here is not to literalize Dickinson’s
complexly allusive, often allegorical meditations about life and death, religion, sexuality, and poetic vision, but to consider how markedly the environmental perspectives implicated in such poems are shaped by the speakers’ geographical movement, contributing to the articulation of a mobile sense of place.

Compared to Dickinson, Whitman’s male speakers are almost incessantly and boundlessly mobile, yet they, too, remain invested in specific geographies. A prime example is “O Magnet-South” from 1860, which has mainly been understood as poem of regional reconciliation (Thomas 141; Mancuso 38) based on a mere “conglomerate of landscape features, plants, and animals” (Kolb 5); more recently it has also been read as a critique of Southern pastoral traditions (Wilkenfield 53-55) and as indirect response to emerging preservationist discourses (Gerhardt, “Managing the Wilderness” 229-31). What is noteworthy here, though, is how much the poem’s account of Southern geographies depends on the speaker’s imaginary mobility. At first, and structurally comparable to Dickinson’s “It bloomed and dropt,” such mobility seems to stand in the way of a more nuanced environmental perception since the rapid crisscrossing of the region prevents any in-depth engagement with the landscapes in question. Moreover, the poem seems to confirm more static notions of place-attachment since in the end the speaker, who apparently had left the South and now yearns to return “home,” hopes to “never wander more.” Yet it is precisely the movement across large parts of the South that enables him to develop and express something like a composite vision of the place, which includes a range of species and landscapes that characterize the region together, including a “Kentucky corn-field” with “the tall, graceful, long-leav’d corn, slender, flapping, bright green, with tassels, with beautiful ears each well-sheath’d in its husk,” and a system of “half-known half-impassable swamps, infested by reptiles, resounding with the bellow of the alligator, the sad noises of the night-owl and the wild-cat, and the whirr of the rattlesnake” (LG 396-97). Also, the speaker’s mode of returning to the South after having lived elsewhere shifts his attention toward characteristic features, without making them appear merely exotic; references to “parrots in the woods,” “the papaw-tree and the blossoming titi,” and to “live-oak […], yellow-pine, the scented bay-tree, the lemon and orange, the cypress, the graceful palmetto” are both stereotypical and suggestive of a discriminating eye, enhanced by the speaker’s large-scale movements (LG 396). In short, mobility is a key motor for the poem’s keen attention to the region’s natural-cultural systems, even as it manifests, and perhaps serves to justify, a selective myopia, especially with regards to an agricultural system based on slave labor.

Interestingly, Whitman’s account of a dreamlike journey, too—like Dickinson’s piece about walking past a flower—revises the conventions of a specific mobile poetic tradition, in his case, the song of a traveling bard. The genre that commonly revolved around singing about individual experiences or the history of a people is revised here so that the emphasis shifts towards views of the land. This speaker turns his full attention to the land in question, and even as he keeps referring to his own movement (he wanders, returns, floats, crosses, sails, passes, enters, darts and departs), his mobile way of being in the world is symbolically linked to and reinforces the presence of “all the moving things” of the South (LG 396). More
importantly, Whitman’s characteristic catalogs of geographical particulars, adding feature upon feature in rhythmic lines of parallel constructions, contribute to the place-orientedness of this mobile vision, since they perfectly correspond to the act of recording what one sees while moving through a landscape.

Human mobility enables powerful expressions of place in other Whitman poems as well. In “There Was a Child Went Forth,” the idea of a young boy gradually widening his range of movement as he takes note of the world yields catalogs of dynamically rendered natural and cultural phenomena, culminating in a full embrace of mobile environmental identity and perception, in which “[t]he horizon’s edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance of salt marsh and shore mud” become “part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day” (LG 308). “Starting from Paumanok” oscillates, from its title to the final “haste on with me,” between “roaming many lands” and “dwell[ing],” developing a sense of place(s) that evolves from precisely this back and forth, rather than from any static kind of rootedness, as in this characteristic passage: “As I have walk’d in Alabama my morning walk, / I have seen where the she-bird the mocking-bird sat on her nest in the briers hatching her brood. / I have seen the he-bird also, / I have paus’d to hear him near at hand inflating his throat and joyfully singing” (LG 20). The same is true for “Our Old Feuillage,” where the speaker identifies with migrating birds, imaginatively recording what he sees, and for “Song of Myself,” where he finds he is “afoot with [his] vision,” presenting massive catalogs of plants, animals, and geographical formations, in lines whose initial “where’s” and “over’s” match the movements of the poet who walks, wanders, visits, flies and sails. Even in the short “These I Singing in Spring” the speaker traverses, saunters, and wanders from gardens into swamps and forests, “collecting, dispensing” flowers, leaves, and branches as symbols of manly love and gestures of mobile environmental connectedness (LG 101-102).

Such a mobile commitment to place is, in fresh ways, also productive in contemporary poetry. For instance, in Vijay Seshadri’s “Lifeline,” a car trip that turns into a three-day odyssey on foot enables, but also forces, a man to perceive the more intricate features of what seems to be a “thousand-square mile dead spot / of Douglas fir.” Regretting that he has driven there in the first place, he begins to stumble “over the cryptic terrain” for days, while the “rhythmic, progressive / movements of his thoughts” and walks lead to “real insight”:

All this was the brainchild of water.
Stretching back beyond the Pleistocene—
how many millions of years?
imperial rain had traced without pity,
over and over again, its counterimage
on the newborn, jagged mountains
until the length of the coast had been
disciplined to a system designed
to irrigate and to nourish the soil.
He decided he’d follow the water down. (240)

Although the poem also functions as a critique of car travel, it does not privilege staying put. This speaker’s epiphanies—about the history of this water-shaped
landscape and the fluid boundaries between more and less cultivated areas, body, and environment—are all engendered by his movement through place. Recalling Dickinson’s and Whitman’s poetic practice, the poem also intertwines human and nonhuman mobility in ways that heighten its sense of place, while its loco-descriptive rigor prevents the speaker’s mobile experience from turning into a purely spiritual journey. Other poems that explore modern travel as catalyst for intense place sensibilities can be found in Ed Roberson’s 2010 collection To See the World before the End of the World, where global species extinction is understood as deadly car ride or a train or plane crash, too late to stop (“To See the World before the End of the World”), while airplane views of cities, lakes, and mountains are compared to the place sense of ancient hunters (“5. Topoi”) and blend human and avian visions of urban and rural landscapes (“Flight Record”).

Roberson’s MPH: The Motorcycle Poems, a 1970 manuscript published in the Chicago Review in 2016, also develops nuanced environmental visions of place, especially in “Mutable Point of Axis,” where the speaker interlinks the movements of leaves in a river, airplanes above, and his own passing, and in “Ensemble Ambient Invaded Music,” where motorcycle and airplane sounds shape the sense of place musically, together with the speaker’s words and a mockingbird’s passing songs.

Apart from testing the environmental perspectives that evolve from cars, trains, and planes, recent American poems also think about mobile relationships to place in the context of migratory, often postcolonial power dynamics: In Major Jackson’s “Migration,” the persona, on traveling through the South, still reads the landscape for signs of lynchings, as he had to in the past, and in Teresa Palomo Acosta’s “Crossing ‘a piece of earth,’” the speaker shifts from heavily policed modes of crossing the Mexican-American border that turn the land into a “flat treadmill” to alternative, also more poetic kinds of crossing that take their cues from saguaros and underground waterways. One of the many environmentally resonant poems that combine the place perspectives of travel and postcolonial mobilities is Khaled Mattawa’s “Road from Biloxi”; here, immigrants on a day trip get stuck on a highway, where they negotiate regrets over having left a country in which “rebels […] took [their] father’s ranch” with perceptions of the Mississippi delta as a place of natural and human decay marked by centuries of violence against African and Native Americans, while yearning not for arrival but for further journeys—to the Atlantic, to the Mediterranean—and for “the smell of the earth turning around itself” (208).

Some of these texts may seem to do so against their own will, in tones ranging from ironic and skeptical to elegiac and bitter, yet like the poems of Dickinson and Whitman before them, they let their moving speakers express an intricate sense of place and its various mobile coordinates. Even as such recent examples juxtapose conventional nature walks with the kinds of travel made possible

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10 For an in-depth discussion of the ways in which Roberson’s poetry re-conceptualizes air travel at the complex juncture of mobility, place, and environmental change, profoundly linked to questions of technology and social difference, see the essay by Judith Rauscher, “From Planar Perspectives to a Planetary Poetics: Aeromobility, Technology and the Environmental Imaginary in Contemporary American Poetry,” in this volume.
through modern technologies, and foreground the race and gender politics that circumscribe people’s movement in areas long marked by overlapping histories of oppression, their views of plantations and border zones, coastlines and urban landscapes participate in a longer tradition of formulating place perspectives that are environmentally insightful precisely because they emerge from various kinds of human mobility.

**Mobile Cultures**

A third, related way in which Dickinson and Whitman as well as more recent poets intersect environmental place imaginaries with questions of geographical movement involves references to more wide-ranging cultural mobilities. These include the dynamics of nineteenth-century immigration and travel, Westward expansion, colonial exploration, Native American displacement, and African American (im)mobilities during and after slavery, as well as the increasingly ubiquitous movements of people, goods, technologies, and ideas in the context of globalization. In Dickinson’s place-oriented poems, such references to her time’s progressively more extensive, albeit deeply unequal structures of mobility may be relatively few, yet it is noteworthy here that some of her seemingly most pristine landscapes are crisscrossed by unspecified visitors or travellers, as if to prevent these realms from appearing as eternally harmonious entities, wholly separate from human interference. This is the case in “Nature – the Gentlest Mother is” (Fr741), where the steady routines of a local forest can “By Traveller – be heard,” and in “Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre” (Fr778), where a seemingly well-balanced, self contained natural system in “Place” is visited by “Passer by” or “Boy.” In a stark variation, “Two Travellers perishing in Snow” (Fr967) reimagines a common local forest as a site of limited human mobility. In other poems, relatively immobile, female speakers allude to distant geographies by referring to knowledge systems developed by more mobile contemporaries, linking local modes of being in place to transnational perspectives, often informed by colonial power mechanisms. For all their profound psychological dimensions, such an interplay informs her volcano poems “I have never seen ‘Volcanoes’” (Fr165), in which “Travellers tell” of the dangerously mobile dimensions of such “phlegmatic mountains,” and “Volcanoes be in Sicily” (Fr1691), in which the speaker’s locally circumscribed movements are inflected by her culture’s transnational place paradigms, codified in a geography book.

In Whitman’s place imagination, references to journeys and journeyers, travelers and sailors are so numerous that they create a much more pervasive sense of mobile environmental perception and interaction. In particular, the ideal of a democratic, shared human mobility informs many short poems such as “On Journeys through the States,” in which a collective “we” is urged to identify with the seasons, pass through America’s regions, and “[Sail] henceforth to every land, to every sea” while paying attention to the ecological setup of specific places (LG 10). It is also a key idea of the long, programmatic “Song of the Open Road,” in which the “brown path” where everyone and “any thing passes” matters as demo-
ocratic and spiritual symbol and as outdoor space, where the common movement of all travelers enables and intensifies the intense perception of herbs, trees, and the open air as wonderfully intertwined (LG 126, 127). These idealizing visions of supposedly all-inclusive, joint journeys and the environmental place perceptions they yield implicitly transcend the stark differences in people’s geographical mobility along racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines; at the same time, the silence about such disparities risks rendering invisible precisely those for whom the participation in more wide-ranging, self-directed forms of movement would be most liberating.

In several other Whitman poems, the green resonances of his culture’s structures of mobility are considerably complicated and more than partially compromised by the simultaneous embrace of imperialist or colonial structures. Already in “Salut Au Monde,” the advancement of mobile technologies enables suggestive visions of “the long river-stripes of the earth” and of the earth as a whole as “great round wonder rolling through space” (LG 120; 118), yet Whitman’s attempt to imaginatively naturalize “the tracks of the railroads of the earth,” “the electric telegraphs of the earth,” and “the tracks of ancient and modern expeditions” at best overestimates nature’s regenerative powers and implicitly justifies the violence caused by these developments (LG 120-21). In “Passage to India,” too, individual and collective mobilities lead to sensitive views of the world’s varied geographies, yet the poem embraces not only the visions of fourteenth-century Moroccan scholar and transcontinental traveller Ibn Battuta but also those of explorers like Columbus and da Gama, reiterating their yearnings to “conquer” the world’s lands and seas so that they partially dominate the text’s place constructions (LG 349).

Finally, Whitman’s post-Civil War “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” centers on the military movements of “tramping” and “marching” soldiers-turned-settlers who move “Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep” and come from “the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus, / From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail,” capturing a violent haste that renders the regions in question almost invisible, except for quick references to forests to be felled, rivers to be redirected, and mountains to be drilled (LG 192-93). In a somewhat analogical mode, “Song of the Redwood-Tree” privileges the Westward movement of white settler colonialism to a degree that makes California’s coast with its ancient sequoia trees visible only at the point of ruthless destruction. The place perspectives yielded by such an ideologically inflated mass movement are reduced to the expression, sensitive but futile, of the trees’ intense suffering, and the recollection of the land’s long natural-cultural history in a voice that appropriates and subsumes those of Native Americans and their lives-in-place.

Similarly complicated references to the movements of large numbers of people often characterize contemporary environmental poems, once more testifying to the ways in which multilayered formulations of a mobile sense of place have become quite pervasive in American poetry. Indeed, all the recent poems discussed here so far situate their reflections about landscapes full of movement and change,
and about the place insights of mobile speakers, within such frameworks. From Julianna Spahr’s account of Hawai‘i as a place whose “constant motion” references the complex entanglements of past colonization and current travel, to Michael Rothenberg’s portrait of a plant in a language that reverses the structures of empire, to Vijay Seshadri’s and Khaled Mattawa’s readings of places in the United States and across the world from the interlinked perspectives of car rides and global migration patterns, contemporary poems make a point of letting overlapping cultures of mobility refract their place perspectives in ways that profoundly rethink the parameters of environmental perceptions, politics, and poetics. At a time of increasingly far-reaching, indeed pervasive mobilities, they continue the work of precursors such as Dickinson and Whitman, whose poetic projects already undermined binary notions of sense of place and mobility, environmentally sensitive and destructive ways of being in the world, and, ultimately, nature and culture.

In American literature, then, there is a distinct tradition of environmentally resonant poetry that rethinks place from the perspective of mobility without relinquishing either one. Such poems have become increasingly visible over the past two or three decades, yet they have been a part of America’s environmental imaginary much longer, as the works of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman suggest. Reading their mid-nineteenth century poems and contemporary examples with and against one another demonstrates that, although they are concerned with very different environments and forms of mobility and talk back to very different cultural developments, they share key strategies of rethinking place, in ecological terms, not as a domain of stability and rootedness but as fundamentally mobile realm. Most prominent among these strategies are the evocation of specific geographies as substantially marked by mobility, the focus on personas whose environmental insights are critically informed by movement, and references to more generally mobile cultures. Through these overlapping tactics, the poems of Dickinson, Whitman, and various contemporary writers express a distinctly mobile sense of place—a way of conceiving of the larger-than-human world that is not inhibited or hindered but ultimately deepened by the acknowledgement of the mobilities that shape both the natural world itself and our existence in and with it. It is this mobile sense of place, I argue, that lies at the heart of a more abstract ecopoetics of mobility, a poetics that straddles the environmental imagination of place and a pronounced interest in mobility. Through this ecopoetics, American poetry challenges established notions of mobility as prime adversary of an environmental outlook and practice, and it participates in the formulation of an important new idiom that shows how environmental concerns and mobility operate in tandem.

Works Cited


