Socializing the Nature Poem: The Non-Human World and Identity

As Audre Lorde said, “Our visions are essential to create that which has never been, and we must each learn to use all of who we are to achieve those visions.” The “nature poem” was never just about nature. When we look at anything, we put ourselves into that gaze. Five poets of diverse backgrounds share poems that engage with the more-than-human world in ways that are accurate, ethical, nuanced, and surprising, connecting gender, race, geography, sexuality, and culture.

Poetry Reading, Ecological Writing

Event Organizer, Moderator, & Participant

Derek Sheffield’s collection, *Not for Luck*, was selected by Mark Doty for the Wheelbarrow Books Poetry Prize. He is a coeditor of *Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy* and *Cascadia: A Field Guide through Art, Ecology, and Poetry* (2023). He edits poetry for *Terrain.org*, a magazine devoted to place-centered literature and art, and teaches ecological writing at Wenatchee Valley College in central Washington.

Event Participants

Chaun Ballard’s chapbook, *Flight*, was the winner of the 2018 Sunken Garden Poetry Prize and is published by Tupelo Press. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Narrative Magazine, Rattle, The New York Times, Terrain.org, Tupelo Quarterly*, and other literary magazines.

Brian Teare is the author of six critically acclaimed books of poetry, most recently *The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven* and *Doomstead Days*. An Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, he lives in Charlottesville, where he makes books by hand for his micropress, Albion Books.

Elizabeth (Betsy) Aoki is a video game producer, an assistant poetry editor at *Terrain.org* and author of the debut poetry collection *Breakpoint*, which explores gender, race and technology. *Breakpoint* was a National Poetry Series finalist and the winner of the Patricia Bibby First book award. Its signature poem was selected by Jericho Brown as the winner of the Auburn Witness Poetry Prize in 2021.

Michael Wasson, author of *Swallowed Light*, is a 2019 Ruth Lilly Poetry Fellow and a 2018 NACF National Artist Fellow in Literature. He is nimiipuu from the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho.

Event Program

The moderator will begin by welcoming the audience and introducing the panelists and the nature of the panel and its conception (10 minutes). Then each panelist will read for 11 minutes. The panel will end with a 10-minute Q&A with the audience.
Participant Initial Remarks

**Betsy Aoki**

I will be reading and presenting three poems that have a different take on “landscape” and what it means to explore it.

“Walking here is to be swallowed by the sky” takes a look at the wreckage of Topaz internment camp, a place where thousands of Japanese Americans were detained and live with armed guards during World War II. The museum, launched in 2017, also bears witness to the history of what happened to a group of people transplanted by racism into a new geology.

“The decimal is a heartbeat; it can stop itself, or repeat” talks about the landscape of travel, of personal memory and also the memory inside computers. Decimal is an example of what my new book Breakpoint tries to do – show poetic scenery and subjects with a computational sensibility and language.

“Okuri Inu, or the sending-off dog demon” will take us to the realm of the fantastic, the folklore aspect of a personal landscape and also the cultural roots.

**Possible Questions for Panelists**

What aspects of your identity do you actively seek to bring into your poems dealing with the natural world?

Are there tropes of nature writing you seek to upend in your work?

How does the landscape of what you write about allow you to talk about more than the scenery?

What are the challenges of writing a good “nature poem” in the current pandemic environment? Do certain aspects of nature writing become more urgent in these situations? Do certain aspects shift to less important?