

# **From Planar Perspectives to a Planetary Poetics: Aeromobility, Technology, and the Environmental Imaginary in Contemporary American Poetry**

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## *ABSTRACT*

Late modernity is often associated with the uneven pressures of globalization, increasing technologization, and an intensification of migratory, economic, and cultural flows that alienate the subject, frequently figured as a traveler, from the natural world. Contemporary American poetry, in particular by ethnic poets invested in histories of displacement, explores these tensions by evoking travel by plane. Going beyond common themes in poems of flight, these texts interrogate the desire for place-attachment in a highly mobile world, and the peculiar perspectives on the natural environment open to the air traveler. In this essay I analyze selected poems about aeromobility from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, arguing that they are not only plane poems but also ‘planetary poems.’ Drawing from recent critical discourses on ‘the planetary,’ I demonstrate how these texts combine considerations of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference with ecological sensibilities and thus evoke complex global environmental imaginaries. As a reading of Ed Roberson’s collection *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2010) shows, recent American poems of flight are centrally concerned not only with questions of mobility, but also with the role of technology in our current age of global conflict and environmental change. Contemporary poetry of aeromobility thus makes possible a (techno-)critical reexamination of traditional, planar perspectives on nonhuman environments and allows for an exploration of the revisionary potential of an eco-ethical, anti-imperialist planetary poetics.

It is frequently argued that our current age of globalization is determined by people’s rapidly increasing reliance on new communication and transportation technologies. This digitalization and technologization, critics suggest, has intensified not only the worldwide mobility of people, goods, and ideas but also the alienation of the postmodern subject—often figured as the eternal migrant or traveler—from the natural world. Contemporary American poetry has registered these tensions, actively participating in a broad range of discourses surrounding the effects of globalization, also and especially with an eye to the nonhuman environment. In particular, a considerable number of poems, often by ethnic American authors or authors with a migratory background, link discourses of global mobility to shifting environmental perspectives by evoking travel by plane: Going beyond personal meditations on life, death, the passing of time or the individual’s position in society, themes common in earlier aviation poetry, contemporary American poems about aeromobility frequently shift the attention from interpersonal to human-nature relations. These poems of flight contemplate both the desire for emplacement in a highly technological and mobile world and the peculiar perspectives on the natural environment afforded to the

air traveler. In doing so, they engage the trope of the machine in the garden (Leo Marx) in the historical context of our present “culture of air travel” (Cwerner 4). In this paper I argue that contemporary American poems about air travel by authors such as Diana Der-Hovanesian, Agha Shahid Ali, Derek Walcott, and Ed Roberson are not only plane poems but also ‘planetary poems.’ Drawing from recent theorizations of the ‘planetary’ that combine critical discussions of globalization with ecological considerations, I demonstrate how their poems about aeromobility challenge simplistic notions of national belonging by acknowledging racial, ethnic, and cultural difference and at the same time evoke complex “glocal knowledges” (Livingston) that resonate with distinct environmental implications.<sup>1</sup> Finally and by analyzing Ed Roberson’s poetry in more detail, I will show how the planetary poetics of contemporary American poetry of flight depends crucially on an engagement with technology as an ambivalent social, political, and cultural force that requires further consideration in our age of mobility and global environmental crisis.

At least since the turn of the millennium, scholars invested in critical reexaminations of processes, effects, and cultures of globalization have used ‘the planetary’ to expose the limits of discourses surrounding ‘the global.’ In the works of scholars such as sociologist and cultural critic Paul Gilroy, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, and ecocritic Ursula K. Heise the term emerges as an ethically charged alternative to ‘the global.’ In their work ‘the planetary’ draws attention to the importance of rethinking globalization and mobility in relation to histories of colonization and imperialism, questions of cultural difference, and issues such as environmental change. In *Against Race* (2000), Gilroy famously argued for what he called a “planetary humanism” (2), defined as an intentionally utopian “postracial and postanthropological version of what it means to be human” (15). After being criticized for the universalist tenor of his planetary humanism, Gilroy responded in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) by suggesting that “[t]he planetary [...] specifies a smaller scale than the global, which transmits all the triumphalism and complacency of ever-expanding imperial universals” (xv). Gil-

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I analyze the transnational and global environmental imaginaries offered by poetry about aeromobility from the 1980s onward. Therefore, I am less interested in poems that dwell primarily on “the burden of carbon guilt” or engage related environmentalist arguments about the disastrous ecological consequences of air travel (Garrard 177). Nevertheless, plane-caused pollution forms an important backdrop for my analysis here: In their annual review 2015, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) announced new record numbers for global passenger travel for 2015, when approximately 3.5 billion people boarded aircrafts for business or leisure, roughly 200 million more than the year before and over 1.5 billion more than in 2005 (see the IATA annual reviews 2005, 2014, and 2015). According to a 20-year forecast published as part of the 2016 annual review, the IATA expects passenger numbers to reach 7 billion by the year 2034. In this context, and even though the annual carbon emission of airplanes only accounts for about 2 percent of the global annual total, it is important to be aware, as Greg Garrard notes in his article “The Unbearable Lightness of Green: Air Travel, Climate Change and Literature” (2013), that a single transatlantic flight emits about 2.7 metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e in addition to various other greenhouse gases—the same amount an average Cuban citizen produces in a year (2)—putting considerable further strain on an already burdened atmosphere.

roy imagines ‘the planetary’ as an anti-imperialist critique of discourses around globalization, an idea also suggested by Spivak in *Death of a Discipline* (2003). Discussing the politics of world literature and the ethics of literary criticism, Spivak rejects the global as inextricably linked to “the gridwork of electronic capital” that nourishes fantasies of control and domination (72). At the same time she embraces the planet as a “species of alterity, belonging to another system” which we “inhabit [...] on loan” (72). Spivak’s argument remains rather abstract, but it conjures up both an awareness of cultural difference and a sense of responsibility vis-à-vis the natural world, two issues also at stake in the writings of Heise. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008) Heise critiques “the Blue Planet concept” embraced by most strands of environmentalist thought for its “erasure of political and cultural differences” (24).<sup>2</sup> As an alternative she proposes an “environmentally oriented cosmopolitanism” or *eco-cosmopolitanism* that grounds local, regional, and national ecological discourses “in a thorough cultural and scientific understanding of the global” and envisions a “planetary ‘imagined community’” that reaches into the nonhuman world (59; 61).<sup>3</sup> Planetary poetry, as I define it, evokes critical eco-cosmopolitan imaginaries from a perspective of mobility that challenges nationalist discourses without dissolving issues of cultural difference in abstractions of ‘the global.’ In contemporary American poetry one of the genres that features such a planetary poetics is poetry about air travel, a genre that emerged in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, began to explore issues of globalization after World War II, and eventually turned to the increasingly complex human-nature relationships in glocal contexts toward the end of the millennium.

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<sup>2</sup> Heise’s “Blue Planet concept” refers to the politically and culturally highly productive idea of planet Earth as a ‘blue marble.’ This idea, Heise explains, became popular among environmentalists and the broad public alike in the aftermath of the publication of the now-iconic “Earthrise” photograph taken by members of the Apollo 8 crew on December 24, 1968. On December 25, American poet Archibald MacLeish published “Riders on Earth Together, Brothers in Eternal Cold,” a short prose piece that was reprinted alongside the “Earthrise” photograph in the May 1969 issue of the *National Geographic*. In his piece, MacLeish reflects on Earth seen from outer space and on the impact of such an image on humans’ self-understanding as earth-dwellers: “To see the earth as it truly is,” he writes, “small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold - brothers who know now they are truly brothers” (1). MacLeish’s lines respond to the almost fantastical image of Earth taken from outer space as much as to the intense domestic and international turmoil of 1968. In this double context his description of Earth as “small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence” together with his call for global brotherhood highlight both the emotive power of whole-earth discourse and its tendency to obscure uncomfortable political realities and social differences.

<sup>3</sup> See also Karen Thornber’s discussion of contemporary critical imaginations of “planetary consciousness” by scholars such as Nelson Maldorador Torres, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, or Wai Chee Dimock, whose writings counter “local-, ethno-, anthro-, or other centrisms” and instead consider “intercultural networks that negotiate relationships between people and environments” (25).

**From National Aviation Poetry to the Global Poetries of Passenger Flight:  
A Short History of the Poetics and Politics of Aeromobility in the United States**

Ever since the Wright brothers undertook the first successful attempts at powered flight on December 17, 1903, and certainly since Charles Lindbergh completed the first non-stop flight from New York to Paris on May 21, 1927, aviation has captured the American poetic imagination.<sup>4</sup> As Laurence Goldstein notes, more than ten thousand poems were published in national magazines and newspapers in the aftermath of Lindbergh's flight, making this highly anticipated and well-publicized event a "test case of the poet's traditional role [...] as a praiser of heroes [...] and] true historian of a culture's epic achievements" (294). During the 1930s and 1940s poetry about aviation became a mass phenomenon, with scenes of flight featuring not only in the more conventional, popular kinds of poetry now largely forgotten but also in the more innovative and complex texts that still find critical acclaim today. In the United States, poets such as W.H. Auden and Muriel Rukeyser, who wrote powerfully about aeromobility and politics, were published in poetry magazines such as *Dynamo: A Journal of Revolutionary Poetry*. Contributors to this short-lived, left-wing magazine were interested in "dynamic rather than static poetry [...] and in the machine as a source for imagery" (Novak 526-27). However, they stood far removed from, and in the case of Rukeyser even actively against, the pro-war fascist rhetoric of Italian futurist aeropoetry, a genre that celebrated the experiences and technologies of flight and was frequently militaristic in orientation (Rudnitsky 239; Bohn 210). Poetry of air travel of this early phase both in Europe and the United States expressed political extremes and used the full aesthetic breadth of the poetic spectrum, underscoring the importance of critically examining the politics and poetics of texts engaged with questions of aeromobility. While a great number of European and American plane poems in the interwar period thus continued to celebrate the pilot-soldier as national hero, voices that challenged narratives of progress and militarized nationalism evoked in relation to the plane as a "political machine" became increasingly frequent during the 1940s and 1950s (Cwerner 6). The U.S.-American aviation poetry that emerged from the political conflicts of the two world wars was aesthetically and thematically diverse and wrought with tensions between the conventional and the avant-garde, the traditional and the experimental, as well as between the nationalist and the transnational. These tensions continued to register in the genre as it began to engage questions of globalization during the second half of the twentieth century.

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to the countless aviation enthusiasts who wrote poems on the matter during the first decades of manned flight, many professional and amateur pilots of the period also turned to poetry in order to describe the experience of and the change of perspective made possible by flying the new, motorized planes. One of the most famous examples is probably Amelia Earhart, the first woman to complete a solo flight across the Atlantic. After she disappeared in 1937 during an attempt to circle the globe by plane, several poems about air travel were found in her private papers. During her lifetime, one of these poems, entitled "Courage," was published as part of an article about her flying career in an issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic* on July 1, 1928 (see Morris).

After World War II, the ever-increasing success of the motorized aircraft together with the recent memory of its destructive potential led poets to reflect in more complex ways about the changed perspectives on human-world relations afforded by the aviation technology. This development continued into the 1960s, when the rise of commercial air travel changed the landscape of poetry about aeromobility dramatically: Suddenly, the pilot was replaced by the passenger as the center of the plane poem. This change brought with it a distinct new point of view regarding flight as a means of international travel increasingly available to the broader public. According to literary scholar Marit MacArthur, the “poetry of passenger flight” from the 1960s to the early 1980s, a time when air travel was “[n]o longer thrilling, [but] not yet tedious,” functions as an “apt trope for the difficulties of imagining the global and registering the conundrum of globalization” (266, 267). This conundrum of globalization, MacArthur suggests, is expressed in poems like Derek Walcott’s “The Fortunate Traveller” through a marked conflict between “whole-earth discourse [...] and its immediate negation with darker, one-world discourse,” or in other words between a potentially charitable cosmopolitanism and the risks of exploitative global capitalism (277). MacArthur’s reference to a positively connoted “whole-earth discourse” adds an environmental dimension to her argument.<sup>5</sup> When she concludes that “[b]y defamiliarizing the ubiquitous experience of passenger flight, poetry can imaginatively restore a relation between the passenger and the earth below,” one feels inclined to ask whether this “imaginatively restore[d] relation” afforded by the poetry of passenger flight may have any ecological significance (278). My own reading of poems of passenger flight from the 1980s onward emphasizes moments where it does. The poems I have selected imagine the experience of flight as one that changes perspectives on human-nature relations in ways that are environmentally suggestive. At the same time, these poems are attentive to the complex power hierarchies and dynamics of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference that characterize globalization during late modernity. Put differently, these late twentieth-century poems about air travel are planetary poems that interrogate the specific conditions of living and writing under the pressures of accelerated global mobility and ubiquitous signs of environmental crisis.

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<sup>5</sup> MacArthur here challenges cultural historian Robert Wohl who argues in *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908–1918* (1994) that powered flight introduced “a new way of seeing in which [...] the earth became a target as far removed from the personal experience of the observer or the bombardier as a distant planet” (Wohl 286, qtd. in MacArthur 265). Much like Wohl, theorists of globalization and ecocritics alike have long argued that the increasing technologization in postmodernity has led to a separation of people, ideas, and goods from place and specific cultural contexts. In such narratives of human-nature alienation air travel functions as a poignant metaphor and simultaneously as a concrete example for experiences of detachment and processes of displacement, particularly where these experiences and processes trouble, disrupt, or reconfigure notions of the local and the global.

### Toward a Planetary Poetics in Contemporary American Poetry of Aeromobility

Exploring the possibilities of a planetary poetics through air travel means drawing attention to the diverse realities and material dimensions of people's lives in a highly mobile world, without disavowing the cultural productivity, political power, and real-world effects of discourses of globalization.<sup>6</sup> Poems about aeromobility by late twentieth-century poets such as Diana Der-Hovanesian, Agha Shahid Ali, and Derek Walcott engage in the project of imagining a planetary poetics by using a variety of poetic strategies. Moving back and forth between the concrete and the abstract, the literal and the metaphorical, the personal and the political, their plane poems are attentive to concrete places and cultural locations as well as to specific histories of displacement and experience of dislocation in local-global contexts. Each in their own way, these poems of flight of the outgoing twentieth-century struggle for a planetary poetics that interrogates the environmental ethics of mobility from the privileged position of the international air traveler, while including perspectives and histories from the margins. Diana Der-Hovanesian's poem "Midwest Landing" alludes to the ways in which histories of U.S. colonization manifest in the landscapes of the American heartland when considered from the perspective of the diasporic subject. Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Leaving Sonora" explores the possibility of meaningful place-attachment in the context of displacement, challenging the kinds of exclusionary models of belonging on which traditional environmental discourse has sometimes relied. Derek Walcott uses an environmentally suggestive apocalyptic rhetoric to explore the social and environmental costs of mobility as represented by air travel. In exploring these different experiences, histories, and perspectives, the three authors depict a multiplicity of affiliations and conflicting local, regional, national, and global attachments that cannot always be specified or fully disentangled.<sup>7</sup> These ambiguities and moments of entanglement, I argue, are especially productive for a critique of the imperialist and neocolonialist discourses on which globalization has sometimes been said to rely, especially in the U.S.-American context. They are also productive for an

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<sup>6</sup> Toward the end of her chapter on planetarity in *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak describes herself in the process of writing the text before the reader's eyes: "My plane is flying now over the land between Baghdad, Beirut, Haifa, and Tripoli, into Turkey and Romania. I am making a clandestine entry into 'Europe.' Yet the land looks the same—hilly sand. I know the cartographic markers because of the TV in the arm of my seat. Planetarity cannot deny globalization. [...] The view of the Earth from the window brings this home to me" (93). In this passage, Spivak reflects on how physical landscapes are turned into political territory through processes of mapping and representation, providing an important critical perspective on the cultural, social, and political dimensions of aeromobility. By alluding to illegal border crossing as well as to her own privileged position as a transnational traveler, she suggests how this virtual grid overlaying the globe may appear negligible in some and be all-important in other contexts.

<sup>7</sup> Along similar lines, Jahan Ramazani uses the term "planetary poem" in his landmark study *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) for texts that provide an extraterritorial view of the Earth. He suggests that they require a different kind of "critical pressure, to specify [their] local, regional, and national bearings" and thus implies that planetary poems pose a particular challenge to readers interested in 'placing' poems in terms of their cultural location, influences, and origins (17).

investigation of the kinds of environmental imaginaries of mobility that poetry can evoke, maybe more effectively than prose, through its condensed yet open, associative, and at times intentionally polyvalent use of language.

Diana Der-Hovanessian's plane poem "Midwest Landing" is part of a 1999 collection that explores the poet's family history in the context of the Armenian diaspora and the author's life in the United States as a form of hereditary exile that brings with it the challenge of having to bear witness to histories one has not been witness to. Amid poems concerned with death, aging, and the poet's struggle to memorialize the murdered victims and displaced survivors of the Armenian genocide of 1915, "Midwest Landing" stands out because it focuses on the vast landscapes of the American Midwest. Traveling by plane and approaching her final destination, the speaker finds herself "[m]idway, Midwest, midlife / and heading down."<sup>8</sup> Looking outside the window, she sees

neat square fields, –  
 no sign of towns.  
 No graveyard, junkyard,  
 [...]  
 No street light, fleet flights,  
 just alfalfa and corn. (8)

Der-Hovanessian's Midwestern fields, represented in a staccato sequence of images, appear deserted and utterly removed from human settlements and other landmarks that would allow for an accurate geographical positioning. There is "[n]o beach front, mall front, / store front, no square," only "swatches of amber and brown / of wheat tassled in silver / dusts the ground," as she puts it later in the poem. Yet precisely because the landscape has been shaped in such characteristic fashion by industrialized agriculture, it is distinctly Midwestern, especially if viewed from an airplane. By insisting through repetition and asyndetic structures on those elements of human civilization that do not form part of the picture that presents itself to the air traveler, the poem invites readers to reflect on those mechanisms of global capitalism that have turned the Midwest into the country's granary but also resulted in a system of monoculture and industrial farming that is highly questionable from an environmental perspective.

If the initial impression of the landscape is one of uniformity and thus recognizability, the reference to "wheat," "alfalfa[,] and corn" in this passage is telling, since none of these plants is endemic to the United States. While corn was originally cultivated by indigenous peoples in Mexico, wheat was only introduced to the North American heartland during colonization. The same is true for alfalfa, which is known as 'lucerne' in the rest of the Anglophone world and was first grown in southcentral and southwest Asia, the region in which Armenia, the poet's family's country of origin, is located. Veiled allusions to migratory movements and forced relocations of people and plants like this one, together with references to a "graveyard, junkyard," trouble the pastoral calm and apparent inertia of the scene before the speaker's eyes. At the same time, they mark the Midwest

<sup>8</sup> All subsequent quotes of "Midwest Landing" are taken from Der-Hovanessian's collection *Any Day Now: Poems*, 46.

as a region profoundly affected by past and present colonial and transnational movements. This is also significant because the Midwestern heartland has historically functioned as an “ethnoscape” for the United States, that is, as a “terrain invested with collective significance [which] is felt to be integral to a particular historical culture, community or ethnic” (Smith 150). Der-Hovanessian’s poetic engagement with this iconic landscape from a perspective informed by a concern for the long history of Armenian diaspora and U.S. colonial history highlights the profoundly hybrid nature of the region. It also stresses how the speaker’s self-positioning “midway” depends as much on knowledge of the local environment and history as on attachments to people, cultures, and places elsewhere. Subtly yet consistently, Der-Hovanessian’s poem weaves colonial and environmental histories of migration into descriptions of an iconic American landscape and thus works to counter appropriations of this landscape for nationalistic or otherwise exclusive models of identity and belonging.

Agha Shahid Ali’s collection *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991), too, contains a plane poem that is concerned with the complex “local, regional, and national bearings” of an iconic American landscape—in his case, the deserts of the American Southwest (Ramazani 17). More forcefully than Der-Hovanessian’s poem, Ali’s “Leaving Sonora” speaks to a transnational migrant’s desire for alternative modes of emplacement that also allow for alternative forms of community. Agha Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri-American poet whose texts frequently focus on the experience of living between two places—the poet’s lost homeland of Kashmir and his adopted country, the United States—and on the challenge of having to negotiate the resulting mix of cultures and (poetic) traditions. In the poem “Leaving Sonora” the sense of belonging expressed by the speaker-poet is both mobile and place-based, reaching across time and space and struggling to bridge cultural and ethnic differences. As the title reveals, “Leaving Sonora” does not depict the speaker in the process of arrival, as in “Midwest Landing,” but in a moment of departure. The speaker has boarded a plane and “left the desert at night – to return / to the East,” that is, presumably either to South Asia, the poet’s place of birth, or to New England, where Ali held different teaching positions after receiving his MFA degree from the University of Arizona in 1985.<sup>9</sup> “Certain landscapes insist on fidelity,” the speaker notes in the poem’s first line after an epigraph from Richard Shelton, an Arizona poet whom the speaker describes as “a poet of this desert.” It is not only a shared experience of the Sonoran desert and a shared urge to express the resulting human-place relationship in poetry that links Shelton and the speaker, however. Ali’s plane poem also bears witness to the disappeared Southwestern indigenous people of the Hohokam. Evoking the process by which “earth [... transforms] coal into diamonds” as a figure of how history and experience are condensed into a single poetic image by the poet’s craft, the plane ride

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<sup>9</sup> All subsequent quotes from “Leaving Sonora” are taken from the Ali’s collection *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, 29. For a more detailed analysis of the place-based, transethnic community building in this volume, see my article “On Common Ground: Translocal Attachments and Transethnic Affiliations in Agha Shahid Ali’s and Arthur Sze’s Poetry of the American Southwest” (*European Journal of American Studies* 9.3, 2014).



allows the migrant speaker to imagine a kinship between “the perished tribes” of the Hohokam and those displaced by the conflict between Pakistan and Kashmir referred to more explicitly in other poems in the collection. In this poem, like elsewhere in *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, the speaker simultaneously fashions himself as a Kashmiri exile and as a poet of the Sonoran desert who draws from the works of other equally mobile American writers who focused on the region. His sense of place-attachment, his love for the desert, its natural phenomena, and the history of its many peoples, is enriched by an experience of displacement which in turn is acutely felt in the moment of air travel.

In “Leaving Sonora” the view of a familiar landscape from the perspective of aeromobility allows for temporary interethnic affiliations to emerge between a South Asian migrant and members of a vanished Native American people, whose traces are conjured up by the speaker who sees “Tucson’s lights [...] fade / into the outlines of a vanished village” when his plane is rising through the clouds. With its references to the ancient Hohokam, “Leaving Sonora” seems to be more concerned with the region’s history than with its present, including no reference to the lives and culture of the Tohono O’odham, the Native American people currently inhabiting the Sonoran desert and mentioned only later in Ali’s collection. Nonetheless, the poem’s allusion to different kinds of displacement together with the ambiguity of its title—“Sonora” may refer to a city in Arizona of that name, to the Mexican state of the same name just south of the American-Mexican border, and by association to the desert divided by that very border—raise questions about the cultural as well as environmental dimensions of a very different kind of mobility: the illegal border crossings of immigrants from Mexico as well as Middle and South America into the United States through the Sonoran Desert. As Sarah Jaquette Ray notes in her study *The Ecological Other* (2013), the rising numbers of border crossers in the partially protected area may indeed be said to have impacted the desert’s ecosystem negatively; at the same time, she suggests, real and imagined environmental consequences of immigration may also lead to a problematic infusion of environmental discourses with anti-immigration rhetoric (136-64). While the rise of illegal immigration through the Sonoran Desert was, I would argue, hard to predict when Ali published his collection in 1991, his poetry can be said to counter the kind of racist and nationalistic discourses Ray cautions against. Ali’s poem invokes a place-based sense of belonging that is not hinged on long-term residency. The speaker is invested in the region’s distinctive features as well as conscious of the many historical displacements and persisting transnational affiliations that affect this particular American locale. Rather than precluding a meaningful relationship to the land or a sense of responsibility for its people, the speaker’s own migratory background only intensifies his efforts at respectful cohabitation as well as inhabitation. Although a “thin cloud” eventually separates the departing speaker from “the desert at night,” his transregional and transnational mobility does not sever the speaker’s ties to the place below (29). On the contrary, the plane ride provokes the speaker to imaginatively reflect upon his complex, mobile relationship to the desert and the people linked to it throughout the ages. By redefining who may be considered “a poet of this desert” in the context of

displacement and from the perspective of aeromobility, the text formulates a cultural, social, and environmental imaginary that can be called planetary because it affirms that wholesome emplacement in an age of mass mobility needs to engage with past displacements as well as ongoing migrations, with ethnic differences as well as cross-cultural commonalities, with regional specificities as well as transnational trajectories, and may further require an engagement with the material realities that condition an individual's sense of place as much as with the kinds of (literary) imaginations that shape it.

Derek Walcott's "The Fortunate Traveller," one of the poems of passenger flight MacArthur sees deeply invested in questions of globalization, is also concerned with the cultural, social, and ecological dimensions of air travel. More explicitly than Ali or Der-Hovanessian, Walcott's poem gauges the ethics of aeromobility with regard to its detrimental consequences for the human and nonhuman world. The poem only addresses air travel explicitly in a few sections. Yet, it is the speaker's experience as an international traveler and member of the global elite, as the title suggests, that provides him with insights into the dire consequences of imperialism and economically motivated racial oppression in a variety of places and grants him a planetary perspective, also and especially in environmental terms. Throughout the poem the violent histories of colonial exploitation are shown as being perpetuated by the exploitative system of the global marketplace. Traveling in between places like Haiti, England, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States, the speaker reflects on the actions of those in power and at the end of the poem prophesies the impending doom of the global North using the kind of Christian apocalyptic rhetoric that associates the end of human civilization with a complete overturn of the natural order:

the weevil will make a sahara of Kansas,  
 the ant shall eat Russia.  
 Their soft teeth shall make, *and have not charity*,  
 the harvest desolation,  
 and the brown globe crack like a begging bowl,  
 and though you fire oceans of surplus grain,  
*and have not charity*,

still, through thin stalks,  
 the smoking stubble, stalks  
 grasshopper: third horseman,  
 the leather-helmed locust. (97)

The apocalypse the airborne speaker conjures up is an environmental catastrophe, one with a particular twist, since the grasshoppers and ants evoked in the above passage are especially deadly when they are mobile on a regional or even global scale. "Since God is dead" and despite the references to the Old Testament (95), humanity's destruction in the near future is not the result of divine punishment according to the text but a direct consequence of human wastefulness and greed in the pursuit of ever-increasing financial gain.

Due to his special point of view, the poem suggests, the air traveler is able to see the untenable situation into which ruthless corporations and governments have

maneuvered the world. Millions are left destitute and starving in those regions where “famine sighs like a scythe” and where “the desert / is a moving mouth,” the poem implies, because those nations, institutions, and corporations that look back at a long history of accumulating wealth and power through the exploitation of the less privileged and the destruction of the environment continue to do so even today (89). Lines like “Somalia: 765 000, their skeletons will go under the tidal sand” and references to such texts as Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* link present-day injustices to a history of colonialism and imperialism (89). In the lives of people in the postcolonies, the speaker notes, “the imperial fiction sings” (93); the ideologies of empire still operate and oppress, whether through unequal economic exchange, hierarchical institutions like the church or the consequences of centuries of exploitation. “The heart of darkness is not Africa,” the speaker rages; it is “in the white center of the holocaust,” that is, in the global North, which is doomed to self-destruct and powerful enough to take the entire world with it (93). The speaker who appears both as poet-prophet and traveling businessman is painfully aware that he is part of the global economic system that extracts and sells the world’s resources at the expense of the less fortunate. At one instance, the speaker refers to a briefcase filled with papers from the World Bank as a “square coffin manacled to [his] wrist” (88). At other moments he noticeably struggles with the fact that he is expected to ignore the victims of corporate greed and warmongering. Countless lives are lost, the poem repeatedly stresses, to famine and violent conflict caused by those who forget human suffering over the hard figures of profit:

Like a telescope reversed, the traveller’s eye  
swiftly screws down the individual sorrow  
to an oval nest of antic numerals,  
and the iris, interlocking with this globe,  
condenses it to zero, then a cloud. (89-90)

While the global perspective available to the international traveler may afford insight into the complex relations of cause and effect in an increasingly connected world, the sense of abstraction and relativity produced by the privileged position of global mobility also gives Walcott’s speaker a chance to distance himself from the negative consequences of his actions, at least temporarily. However, financial gain is not the only distraction the speaker warns against. Literature is another. Part of the third section of “The Fortunate Traveller” reads,

the hungry of this earth [...] remain  
compassionate fodder for the travel book  
[...]  
for everywhere that earth shows its rib cage  
and the moon goggles with the eyes of children,  
we turn away to read. (95-6)

What good, the poem asks, can literature do in a dying world? And, even more self-consciously, to what extent are the global literary industry and escapist literature in particular complicit with ongoing oppression and the world’s progressive destruction? Walcott articulates an awareness of this burden and responds with poetry that exposes his own and his readers’ joint guilt and critiques late-

twentieth-century globalization in which aeromobility has come to play a central role.

Air travel in the poem is both a symptom of human wastefulness and a metonym for the neocolonial culture of exploitation responsible for global inequity and environmental destruction. The “weevil” that brings devastation to the American heartland in the poem’s final section, quoted earlier, already appears once at the beginning of the poem. As the speaker is leaving Europe, where he has traveled for business, we see his “jet / fade like a weevil through a cloud of flour” (89). The global environmental catastrophe in the poem is anthropogenic and bound up with various kinds of voluntary as well as forced mobilities, whether human or nonhuman. Humankind, the speaker suggests by quoting verses of a friend, has proven itself a worthy replacement of “God who doesn’t lose His sleep / if trees burst into tears or glaciers weep” (94). “[A]ping His indifference,” the world’s powerful commit, encourage, or at least fail to prevent genocide and global environmental destruction (94). And yet, somewhat paradoxically, the one to utter a much-needed warning is a transnational traveler and poet who speaks from a position of privilege that amplifies his voice without obscuring his own liability. Walcott’s reliance on biblical imagery and his ironic use of apocalyptic rhetoric serve to strengthen the socio-political and environmental critique conveyed in his planetary poem. Because it is human-made, the end of the world as foreseen by the speaker seems stoppable, at least in theory, if only those guilty of exploitative practices were to listen to the poet’s warning and change their ways.

Ed Roberson’s version of this scenario, published thirty years after Walcott’s poem “The Fortunate Traveller,” is considerably less idealistic. In his collection *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (2010), the award-winning African American poet reflects on the environmental ethics of writing poetry in the face of the finiteness of human existence with an almost fatalistic serenity. Poetry, in this constellation, is not the means to an end but an end in itself. It is through poetry, Roberson’s texts suggest, that we can truly learn to “See the Earth Before the End of the World” (eponymous poem) in all its everyday transient wonders and horrors. More poignantly than many of his other works, Roberson’s poems about air travel negotiate human agency and responsibility toward the environment by interrogating the role of poetry in the context of the kind of mobilization and environmental degradation that characterizes the twenty-first century. More explicitly still than the poems of Der-Hovanessian, Ali and Walcott, his plane poems acknowledge the crucial ways in which technology shapes the planetary perspective proposed in his texts.

### **Aeromobility, Technology, and the Environmental Imaginary in Ed Roberson's Planetary Poetry**

People are grabbing at the chance to see  
the earth before the end of the world,  
the world's death piece by piece each longer than we.

Some endings of the world overlap our lived  
time, skidding for generations  
to the crash scene of species extinction  
the five minutes it takes for the plane to fall (3)

The above lines are taken from the poem "To See the Earth Before the End of the World" (2010), which is placed at the very beginning of Roberson's collection of the same title. Already in its first lines, "To See the Earth," which functions as a kind of prologue, addresses the collection's main thematic concerns: the inevitability of death and planet Earth's destruction and the role of poetry in this apocalyptic scenario. As Greg Garrard notes in "The Unbearable Lightness of Green: Air Travel, Climate Change and Literature" (2013), the apocalyptic mode, along with (comic) allegory, is one of the most common genres of climate fiction concerned with air travel and invested in shaming its reader for "knowing [about the environmental consequences of aviation] but not acting" (182). No such shaming occurs in Roberson's poetry, at least not explicitly or directly. What Roberson's evocative but difficult poems do instead, I would argue, is to provide a space for readers to contemplate their own position in the world and thus their complicity in its destruction, a space for imagination and improvisation, as Garrard would have it, which as he suggests might be most effective for bringing about a change of mind and behavior (186). Like the collection as a whole, Roberson's title poem is centrally invested in questions of movement, including air travel, as well as in the link between mobility and ecological issues, as becomes evident for example in the evocative image of "the crash scene of species extinction" from the above passage (3). Yet while several poems in the collection address human-nature relationships shaped by technology, it is "5. Topoi"—a poem about air travel and the central poem of the eponymous first section of *To See the Earth*—that most succinctly expresses Roberson's planetary perspective.<sup>10</sup> My analysis of aeromobility, technology, and the environmental imaginary in Roberson's poetry thus mainly focuses on this poem, with shorter references to other relevant passages from the collection.

Ed Roberson has been highly successful among reviewers and peers, but scholarship on his work is still relatively scarce. So far, critics have mainly empha-

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<sup>10</sup> "5. Topoi" is one of eleven poems in a poem sequence in *To See the Earth* entitled "Topoi," which in turn forms the main part of a subsection of Roberson's collection also entitled "Topoi." When I refer to "Topoi" hereafter, I am referring to the individual poem rather than the entire poem sequence or the subsection. Other poems in this subsection that are concerned with issues of nature and technology are "To See the Earth Before the End of the World," "2. Deep Time," "6. Many Locations," "7. The \$\$-Men," "9. Old Dependency," "11. What Word," and "We look at the world to see the earth."

sized Roberson's productive combination of avant-garde aesthetics and antiracist politics, that is, the poet's engagement with histories of racial oppression and their traumatic consequences through experimentation with language, form, and genre.<sup>11</sup> However, critics have given little attention to Roberson's relatively recent turn to a historically and ethnically conscious environmental ethics—an ethics that is based on yet also transcends the conventional tropes of airplane poetry and revolves centrally around what I call a planetary perspective. This shift in concern in Roberson's work has much to do with how his writing challenges the dichotomy between political and nature poetry. As Evie Shockley argues, Roberson's more recent publications aim to “illustrate not merely the interrelation, but the identity, of the natural and the political realms” (149). I agree with Shockley that Roberson “is neither primarily concerned with a critique of the negative impact of human societies upon the environment nor [...] devoted to a Romantic idealization of nature's awesome beauties” (151). Still, it is my claim that Roberson's poetry in *To See the Earth* is highly environmentally suggestive not only because it challenges the binary of the social and the environmental but also because it negotiates the effects of technological progress on our perception of the nonhuman environment and our place in it, while also being concerned with U.S. racial politics and questions of inequity on a global scale. The poem “Topoi” brings these issues into productive tension by contrasting the planar perspective of walking with the more complex perspective that arises as a consequence of the experience of flight.<sup>12</sup> Technology, particularly the technology of flight, in this poem is more than that which “alienates us from nature and thus reality,” as John Yau suggests in his review of the book. Rather, in Roberson's latest collection, air travel—in spite of its immensely destructive environmental impact—allows for the emergence of a planetary consciousness that is both historically and ecologically aware and critical of the exploitative, oppressive, and racist dimensions of globalization. Moreover, Roberson goes beyond earlier environmentally suggestive poems about aeromobility, like the ones by Der-Hovanessian, Ali, and Walcott, by critically interrogating the central role of technology in environmental imaginaries for the new millennium.

While Roberson's poetry generally relies very much on the impressionistic description of minute detail and processes of perception, the poem “Topoi” relies in part on a narrative logic when it contrasts the aerial perspective of the air traveler with the planar perspective of the pedestrian. Overall, the poem's form and syntactic structure is uncharacteristically conventional for Roberson, a poet whose

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Kathleen Crown “Reading the ‘Lucid Interval’: Race, Trauma, and Literacy in the Poetry of Ed Roberson” (2000); Brent Hayes Edwards “Black Serial Poetics: An Introduction to Ed Roberson” (2010); Joseph Donahue “Metaphysical Shivers: Reading Ed Roberson” (2010) and “The Umbilicate Ear’: Audition in Ed Roberson's Lucid Interval as Integral Music” (2010).

<sup>12</sup> In his review of *To See the Earth*, John Yau briefly references Roberson's inclusion of air travel as one of the topics into his collection, suggesting that “the transition from flying in a plane to walking” expresses the poet's conviction that “nature (earth) is part of an immeasurable continuum, which human beings cannot exist outside of” (n. pag.). As I hope to show, air travel performs a more central role in the poet's negotiation of environmental concerns.

texts are frequently characterized by an exploration of the space of the page, irregular spacing within lines, disruptive syntax, and nonstandard punctuation (see Shockley 158). And yet this unusual narrative quality and the relative formal conservatism of the poem correspond to the text's central topics: "Topoi" reflects in a profoundly temporal manner on the limits and potential of poetic expression in relation to histories of oppression and futures of environmental degradation by staging and then rejecting an epistemological shift between an imaginary golden age of poetic imagination and the present of the speaker.

"Topoi" begins with the image of a plane's slow "descent into Newark."<sup>13</sup> The view that presents itself to the air traveler is described in the rational, scientifically precise language of mathematics and geographical mapping: "the whole width / of the state of New Jersey is the base of a triangle / underlying that approach to its point." Earth is discursively and metaphorically turned into a map, a "[g]eography test, problem off the wall / to the ground," and laid out before the plane's passenger. Confronted with this sight that transforms land into geopolitical territory, the speaker asks in a slightly concerned tone: "But at / what point did we become so familiar with / such long perspective," that is, the kind of perspective that makes the otherwise indistinct urban landscape of the "pile of Denver" recognizable by the "crumble of the plate up into the Rockies." Landscapes do not only appear here as neatly measured and organized spaces; they are also presented as an opulent meal, ready to be consumed, an image that conjures up histories of colonization as well as urban sprawl and thus the encroachment of human settlement on natural environments. Rather than serving merely as a metaphor for the kind of emotional detachment from the land that facilitates its commodification, the perspective of flight makes the destructive consequences of a predominantly pragmatic "approach" to the land visible to the attentive onlooker.

The next passage of the poem stands in sharp contrast to the scientific rationalism of its first lines, both by engaging the more affective language of imagination and by comparing the perspective provided by "passing through the world by air" with the planar perspective of "some earlier hunter." The speaker initially suggests that for the hunter, the "map / his feet figured" produced a "similar picture" of his living environment, but soon relativizes this statement: "Yet we haven't seen again his visions, haven't yet / dreamt from it even such maps as he had / hunted by." In the poem, the romanticized figure of the prehistoric hunter engages in a kind of imaginative mapping that relies on physical proximity. This immersive imaginative mapping, the poem suggests, produces lived geographies rather than abstract ones, that is, a real-and-imagined map of the region imbued with sense and meaning. The wording in this passage ("picture," "figured," "vision," "dreamt") links the hunter's way of interacting with the land to a traditionally Romantic notion of poetic production. And indeed, the poem's first half is pervaded by a sense of loss and nostalgic longing for the experience of planet Earth as "that garden" which a lack of interest beyond economic value, care, and appreciation has reduced to a "ground ball," a "vacuum, diminished sky of solar space." This

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<sup>13</sup> All subsequent quotes from "5. Topoi" are taken from Roberson's collection *To See the Earth*, 11-12.

Edenic past is also presented as a golden age of poetry, followed by the dark age of our present times, in which “the dream-lines / have been hunted to circumference.” In the second half of the poem, however, this self-conscious nostalgia for a pretechnological age is unmasked as a hollow fantasy and gradually replaced by a more complex planetary perspective which seeks to integrate immersive, intimate, and localized perspectives with the more farsighted, global, and diverse ones provided by technology.

In a dizzying sequence of metaphors and similes the passages following the ones quoted above repeat images like the “ball,” words like “step,” and ideas linked to the act of “hunting” in constantly changing configurations. On the level of both rhythm and metaphor these lines reflect on human existence in a world on the move and speeding toward destruction, a destruction that humans are at least partly responsible for. Having abolished God, spirituality and the Romantic poet-prophet (“that garden’s / gazing ball”), humanity in late modernity is represented in the poem as a “trained bear / dancing on a circus ball.” Humans live meaningless, tragically comic lives until they lose balance or decide to stop fighting for survival:

The hunted step, kept far and fast enough  
away from the hunter to keep the distance of its life,  
shortens to none between them or is that

shit outcome stepped in, become their one,  
in perspective, step from which there is no step out of. (12)

Where the hunter and the hunted, humans and their prey, were once given equal chances of success, the text suggests, humans’ boundless hunger for resources and careless handling of the planet has turned humanity into its own worst enemy. Or as the prefatory poem “To See the Earth” concludes quite succinctly:

we just now see  
  our own lives taken by  
taking them out.               Hunting the bear,  
we hunt the glacier with the changes come  
of that choice. (3)

In an age in which humans have become a geological force, now frequently referred to as the Anthropocene, humanity can no longer escape the consequences of its actions: If Earth comes to an end, so does the human world, and so does every individual subject. As Brent Hayes Edwards notes, the importance of “recursiveness” in Roberson’s poetry, such as the repetition of ideas in the poems “To See the Earth” and “Topoi” or the repetition of the word ‘step’ with changing meanings within “Topoi,” attests to the poet’s resistance against fixing a given poetic image and his efforts at “opening its implications” (630). In the wake of what one could describe as a strategic mobilization of images and meanings, which goes hand in hand here with the actual, physical mobility of the speaker in Roberson’s poems about aeromobility, the binary oppositions initially set up by the poems—air travel vs. walking, plane passenger vs. prehistoric hunter, hunter vs. hunted, rationality vs. imagination—no longer hold. When they collapse due



to Roberson's artful manipulations of syntax and phrasing, an ironic, provocative planetary poetics emerges that registers the effects of technologization and mobilization on how people perceive and imagine the environment and their relationship to it.

Although Roberson's text tackles universal questions such as humanity's role in Earth's imminent destruction, the environmental planetary poetics of "Topoi" and other poems in the collection is also sensitive to the ways in which issues of cultural, ethnic, and racial difference affect people's environmental imaginaries. As Shockley stresses, Roberson's poetry "remind[s] us how much we have racialized the natural world, because he writes so frequently and concretely about locations, creatures, and the like that are raced 'white' or, at the very least, that are not coded 'black'" (153). "Topoi" addresses the racial coding of cultural discourses around nature by toying with reader's expectations of philosophically oriented nature poetry as a 'white genre' and the idea of the (Neo-)Romantic nature poet as a white poet. By introducing the "earlier hunter" right after the speaker remembers "spotting Huron / on the horizon," "Topoi" suggests that the hunter may not be any prehistoric man, but a member of an indigenous North American tribe such as the Wyandot/Wendat, who were given the name "Huron" by early European explorers. In French the name "Huron" resembles the words for "ruffian" and "boar head," two common defamations used by early European settlers for indigenous peoples of the Northeast such as the Mohawks and other members of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) confederacy, whose traditional hairstyle, language, and culture bore some resemblance to that of the Wyandot. "Huron," just like the names of the other places the air traveler observes from his air plane—whether the "Delaware Water Gap," "New Jersey," "Denver," or "Detroit"—conceals histories of violent colonization and Native American displacement.<sup>14</sup> The prominent position of these place-names in the speaker's visual and imaginative mapping draws attention to histories of racial oppression and the ways in which these histories continue to manifest in language and thus the cultural imaginary as well as in the territorial organization of the United States. By hiding these histories in plain sight, but making their traces legible from the perspective of a twenty-first-century air traveler, the poem suggests that these histories of oppression and displacement continue to shape the way in which people relate to the land. Instead of losing importance in the bigger picture of impending envi-

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<sup>14</sup> The case of the Native American Tribe of the Delaware provides an especially telling example for how Euro-American place names actively cover up complex histories of Native American oppression and displacement. Also known as the 'Lenni Lenape,' the Delaware of Oklahoma are an Algonquian tribe and originally lived in the region today constituted by the states of Delaware, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. The Delaware received their Euro-American name from the river of the same designation, which in turn was named after Sir Thomas West, Baron de la Warr, the second governor of the Virginia Colony. With the arrival and westward movement of European settlers, the Delaware were gradually forced west and eventually dispersed. In 1897, finally, parts of the Delaware were forced to move to Oklahoma and join the Cherokee Nation, who themselves had been forcefully relocated to the area about 60 years prior. For a history of the Delaware of Oklahoma, see for example Brice Obermeyer's monograph *Delaware Tribe in a Cherokee Nation* (2009).

ronmental catastrophe, they remain a crucial element of the planetary imaginary evoked by Roberson's poetry.

From the perspective of flight the colonial history of New England manifests itself in "Topoi" in the form of an imaginary map, which the poem's speaker superimposes over the physical landscape of the region. This map represents the United States as contested territory not only in a political sense but also in terms of cultural representation. In the speaker's romanticized version of precolonial mapping—that is, of an immersive, intimate poetic engagement with the land—the localized mobility of the 'earlier hunter' is linked to an intimate knowledge of one's living environment, which in turn promises a fair chance at survival in a hostile yet ultimately familiar and comprehensible world. At the same time, this passage gives voice to a subtle yet trenchant anti-imperialist critique. This critique gains a more global dimension later in the poem, where Earth, the "ground ball" or "circus ball" humans balance on precariously waiting to fall off, is described as follows:

Gaia's gravity-swayed steps take on orbit,  
we in the tropic of balance, in a basket  
on her head, a blue wrap of sky, sun  
ripens the thin rind of the plane to home. (12)

The reference to "Gaia" in the above passage evokes both animistic and scientific environmental discourses that have figured Earth as one single interconnected entity or system.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, 'Mother Earth' is represented as a stereotypical, exoticized woman, possibly an Afro-Caribbean woman, wearing a colorful "wrap of sky," moving with enticing "gravity-swayed steps," and balancing "a basket / on her head." More so than the Native American histories evoked earlier in the text, this passage draws attention to the ways global colonialist and neocolonialist discourses are intertwined with representations of the nonhuman world. In his analysis of one of Roberson's earlier collections, Edwards identifies "a deconstructive poetics" that strives "to attune a critical sensibility that recognizes the constitutive role of absence and forgetting in the national imaginary" (632). In "Topoi" this critical sensibility is cultivated for the larger dimension of the global, or rather of the planetary. In the above quote, Earth in its entirety is represented both as a sacred, godlike giver of life and as an object, waiting to be consumed and—given the history of racist portrayals of women of color—taken by force. The "plane to home," mentioned at the end of the passage quoted above, is compared

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<sup>15</sup> Gaia is the name of a primordial Greek goddess, a personification of the Earth and mother to all heavenly gods, Titans, and Giants. As such she was venerated by the ancient Greek, but is also worshipped by Neo-Paganists whether as a goddess of the earth, as Earth itself, or an embodiment of the earth. Having developed his 'Gaia hypothesis' (named after a suggestion by writer William Golding) during the 1960s and early 1970s together with microbiologist Lynn Margulis, chemist James Lovelock published an essay entitled "The Quest for Gaia" in the *New Scientist* on February 6, 1975. He expanded on his now contested 'Gaia hypothesis' which suggests that the Earth's biosphere exists in a self-regulatory relationship with the planet's inorganic matter, in his 1979 book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* and developed his ideas further in later publications as he became concerned with the effects of global warming and climate change.

to a ripened fruit ready to drop, servicing those who have the means to enjoy the “Sweet fruit of the journey.” These privileged few, the text admonishes, need to consider the potential personal and certain environmental costs of aeromobility, namely “the footprint of life [which] is death.” What remains as the speaker and his fellow passengers “walk about” in “aisles of air [...] with the seatbelt sign off” is a sense of both preciousness and precariousness of the individual human life as much as of planet Earth.

Ed Roberson’s poem “Topoi,” then, represents a reflection on the poetic process set in motion by the experience of flight. The “long perspective” available to the air-traveling speaker from the window of the plane may be increasingly common in an age of mass aeromobility, but it only develops into a planetary perspective after the passenger’s perceptions are defamiliarized in the richly metaphoric and associative language of the poem, which encourages readers to think about the present-day effects of colonization and imperialism in relation to humanity’s highly destructive relationship to the land. At the end of the poem, the reader is confronted with a final image that sums up Roberson’s planetary poetics by providing a figure that manages to integrate both the immersive perspective of the hunter and the longer perspective available to the air traveler:

strung dimensions distant enough to see  
 the ball that all our ways are woven from:  
 sand, the lens grinder’s patient hand, sore elbow, head  
 in the stars, he looks down at his feet. (12)

The “ball that all our ways are woven from” again refers to planet Earth, but now also comes to designate the atom as the constituent of all matter. Scholars have called Roberson both a “scientific materialist” (Yau) and a poet “with alchemical concerns” who “sings of particles that preserve, that knit old forms to new in ecstatic union” (Donahue 703). In the above passage we encounter a “lens grinder” in the process of fashioning the tools humans need to observe either what constitutes our world on the smallest level or what surrounds the planet on the level of the cosmos. The lens grinder represents scientific and technological progress but also the poet who sharpens his readers’ perception and enables them to see familiar scenes with new eyes. The fact that the lens-grinder/poet has his “head / in the stars” but “looks down at his feet” is significant here: the startling views that science and technology offer may provide a different kind of mystification or enchantment than the ones proposed in traditional nature poetry. Still, while appreciating these startling new views, the text implies, one should not forget the everyday marvels of the ‘ground’ on which we stand, that is, the “home” the speaker’s plane is headed toward and the earth “there is no step out of, the compost earth [...] which] is the footprint of life.” Technology, then, does not simply alienate humans from nature in Roberson’s poem “Topoi.” To the contrary, technology may enable a critical revision of human-nature relations. In “Topoi” the speaker not only gains a different perspective on the world through air travel, he eventually develops a planetary perspective that fosters a historically aware, anti-imperialist and decidedly technocritical (albeit not antitechnological) ecological consciousness by integrating the “long perspective” of flight with a more grounded, though

not less mobile one. At times contradictory and conflicted, this planetary perspective acknowledges the profound effects of mobilization and technologization on human perception as well as humanity's absolute dependence on the complex ecosystem that is the Earth, and thus the risks involved in neglecting one's responsibilities towards it.

### **Conclusion: Of Birds and Airplanes— Technocriticism and Contemporary Ecopoetry**

Contemporary American poetry of air travel is centrally concerned with issues of mobility and technology, combining them with a critical discussion of globalization and environmental concerns. By focusing on poems about aeromobility, and thus on one of the technologies that shapes contemporary social life and the natural world, as well as people's identities and cultural imaginaries, my analysis tests a critical terrain situated at the intersection of environmental literary criticism and technocriticism. Associated with theorists like Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, or N. Katherine Hayles, technocriticism as an emerging field of study is invested in a critique of the social and cultural import of technological change. When regarded through an ecocritical as well as a technocritical lens, the U.S.-American plane poem reveals striking affinities with the bird poem, a genre that features prominently in the Anglophone poetic tradition. Whether in Shakespeare's sonnets, Wordsworth's and Coleridge's lyrical ballads, Whitman's "Birds of Passage" cluster, or Wallace Stevens's nature poems, birds frequently represent the poet in ways that investigate human limitation in view of the uncontrollable forces of nature as well as the boundlessness of human imagination inspired by nature's astounding beauty (see Pound; Doggett). In contrast to their Elizabethan and Romantic precursors, bird poems on both sides of the Atlantic from the mid-nineteenth century onward have been increasingly influenced by the rise of the newly differentiated natural sciences and their emphasis on close observation as well as detailed description. Drawing from the expanding knowledge of the field of ornithology in particular and combining naturalist with poetic language, bird poems by such authors as Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, John Clare, or Charles Tomlinson began to express (proto)ecological views about human encounters with the environment (see Gerhardt; Chun; Schlesinger). While exploring the relationship of bird poems and plane poems in more detail goes beyond the scope of this paper, I would still like to suggest in closing that U.S.-American poetry of aeromobility can be read as a specific twentieth- and early twenty-first-century version of, and in some instances also counterpoint to, the bird poem. Read in view of this tradition and from an ecocritical/technocritical perspective, poetry of air travel functions as a special kind of 'nature poetry'—or rather, as a special kind of 'ecopoetry'—that investigates human-nature relations in conjunction with issues of mobility in the context of environmental crisis and technological change, while also addressing experiences of displacement, histories of colonial oppression, and the role of poetry as a means to counter overly simplistic no-

tions of placelessness as a key characteristic of the postmodern condition. More readily than bird poems of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, plane poems register contemporary pressures and contradictory discourses of globalization, in particular where these are linked to technological development and the mobilization of goods, people, and ideas this development entails. Where bird poems sometimes tend to obscure or gloss over the complexity of human-nature relationships in the current transnational, mobile, and highly technologized age, plane poems like the ones discussed in this essay formulate alternative environmental imaginaries that go beyond those proposed by classic nature poetry or certain kinds of more conventional ecopoetry. What contemporary American poetry about air travel allows for by approaching human engagement with nature in connection to questions of technology and mobility, then, is a critical reexamination of traditional, 'planar' perspectives on nonhuman environments as well as an exploration of the revisionary potential of an eco-ethical, anti-imperialist planetary poetics.

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