

Underflow 5

Affects and Ecopoetics Practice

Queer and trans, as affects and subjectivities, are both underflows to normal science. Often intersecting with Indigenous, Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, and Latinx identities, queer and trans bodies and modes of thought have long been present in ecology but marginalized and sometimes suppressed or invisible. Ecopoetics offers a way to evoke and channel these affects and practices. One ecopoetics technique—field writing—is a way of making a relation with one’s immediate surroundings: call that the field, the world, the phenomenal, the present, the real.¹

Field poetics urge writers to put aside goals and frameworks and to let the world in. Core to this practice is reading a counter-canon centering Native, Black, Latinx, queer, and feminist poets and critics and reading poetry through works of environmental science and history. In this reading through, we field poets do not try to integrate the findings of these diverse methods but rather to hold them in conversation, mindful of their authors’ standpoints and political commitments. Reading these poets and scientists, we also look for clues to their practices of writing in the field, and we talk about these practices on trips or in guest lectures. In writing sessions, we bring students to a stretch of shoreline, then plunge them into exercises that explore their own poetics of relation to local waters. We always write too. Ripples, splashes, close encounters with jetsam, and interrupting birds culminate in a polyvocal recitation of our findings. Outside of class, July Hazard and I have used field writing to generate hypotheses for ecological studies, to write poems, to reflect on histories of conquest and ongoing Indigenous lifeways as resistance to colonial violence, and to make theory



Figure I5.1. Laying out a transect near the Duwamish River during a Queer Ecologies workshop. Rob Anderson and Sallie Lau choose the location while Anna Tsing records observations. Photo by Mark Stone.

about queer and trans embodiment in more-than-human dimensions. To illustrate the queer potential that Hazard and I find in ecopoetics methods for field composition, I'll briefly describe two of our favorite field activities: transects and diffractions.

Ecologists use transects to sample diversity of species or landscape features, laying out a tape measure across an area and enumerating the entities of interest that the tape measure falls across. In our version, poets can use a transect to sample memory and perception, mixing the science practice of sampling along a transect with a poetry practice that Brian Blanchfield developed to explore how spontaneous, associational memories could accompany deliberate remembering, inspired by Joe Brainard's *I Remember*.² In our version, rather than recording discrete entities like mussels or willow trees, poets record edges. But what is an edge? It is not an entity, but rather a query or probing of a category and its boundary. A transect of edges is a perversion of the transect, and using the noting of edges as an invitation to memory, in a lineage of queer poets, further queers the scientific practice.

Diffraction is a way philosophers can sense and explore how things come to matter in relation, grounded in the quantum physics



Figure 15.2. Participants in a Portage Bay eco-poetics class ask questions with thrown rocks and record the apparatus's response. Photo by author.

experimental method. As Karen Barad describes in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, reflection is for representationalist methodologies and is set up to look for homologies and analogies. Diffraction, by contrast, is for nonrepresentationalist methodologies and attends to specific material entanglements: "Crucially, diffraction attends to the relational nature of difference; it does not figure difference as either a matter of essence or as inconsequential: 'a diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of differences appear.'"³ Diffraction is everywhere along shorelines, anywhere ripples produced by two or more disturbances interact.

As a practice for generating field writing, the diffraction exercise complements the active "doing something" of the transect (writing, measuring, touching, drawing, grasping) with "doing nothing" (looking, asking, listening, waiting, releasing). Tossing rocks in the water while holding a question in mind: what results? Diffraction, reflection, and refraction all happen simultaneously as ripples spread from where the rock enters the water. Focusing on one of these processes and asking

the same question again and again with different rocks cause different answers to emerge in a poet's mind. The apparatus in this experiment includes the rock tosser; the rock itself in all of its provenance and history of formation, movement, and erosion; the wind and water; the engineering history that carved a channel through the portage path and lowered Lake Washington by three meters, so that pleasure boats could pass through; the other people there; the geese that land on the water, squawking madly; and so on. To extend the analogy to Barad's description of a physics experiment, the plunk-splash of the rock is the diffraction grating slit that the beam passes through, and the question-as-tagged-to-rock-body is what gets diffracted through the slit. What does this do to the rest of the question that doesn't make it through the slit? Such questions help poets attune to the shoreline and to their place in this apparatus and structure the poems that they compile from the activity. As these brief accounts show, this ecopoetics practice is both a queering of method and an interrogation of relation by people who are together in the field. This approach insists on the co-presence of poetry, art, and science in an ever unfolding and iterative call-and-response.

To introduce the transect of edges activity, July Hazard gave these instructions:

On your paper, you'll mark a line down the middle, making two columns. In column 1, record the edges along your transect; in column 2, record a memory that arises when you notice that edge. So, for instance, at fifty-five centimeters, here's an edge of a pothole, so you're writing in column 1, "A cliff's edge breaks asphalt away from asphalt" . . . and suddenly you remember your sister swinging in a swing, pumping her legs, with magic marker flowers she drew on her feet, so now you're writing in column 2, "I remember the flowers my sister drew on her bare feet so she could swing better. I remember how dusty her feet were." Don't force the memories, and don't dwell on them—just let them arise as they will and try to jot down one vivid sense perception from each, then move on back to the transect, and find your next edge.

Then, as the students worked, we gave these instructions: "Don't excavate the whole memory. Just grab the image that flashed up. Look

for edges—one person might see edges that are different from what another person sees. Your memories can be anything! They don't have to be edges! The columns are totally unrelated to each other! Just take the memories as they come!" To introduce the apparatus activity, I gave these instructions: "At the water's edge, pick up a rock, hold a question in your mind, and decide on what process you're going to focus on (reflection, refraction, or diffraction). Then toss the rock in the water and observe the disturbance it creates, and listen for an answer to your question. Record both question and answer in your notebook. Repeat several times, with different processes of focus." For both activities, our final instruction was to assemble the lines from both columns, in an order that feels right, into a poem. As a closing practice, we all stood in a circle and invited each person to read one line from their record of each activity; these became our collective poems.