

Provocations of the Planetary: Ed Roberson's Poetry of Scalar Disjunction

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Explorations



Earthrise photograph taken from Apollo 8, 1969. Public domain. Courtesy of NASA/Glenn Research Center.

Earthrise photograph taken from Apollo 8, 1969. Public domain. Courtesy of NASA/Glenn Research Center.

by Thomas Storey

In “Imperative to Re-Imagine the Planet” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak wrote that “the planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, indeed are it.”¹ This paradox, in which the planetary is both the site of alterity—of irresolvable otherness or difference—and our habitat and identity, seems to be at the heart of any conception of planetary being or well-being; the immensity and otherness of the planetary cannot be easily reconciled with individual perception, despite our

immanence to it. In an era of globalized hypermediation, in which we experience global events as a constant stream of mediated spectacle, the alterity that Spivak highlights can be seen in the disjunctive perceptual frameworks that we interact with on a daily basis.

From news of ecological crises to natural disasters, to the deprivations and obscenities of global conflict, to the mundane concerns of the everyday, our experience oscillates between the local and the global, the singular and the collective, the distant and the intimate, and the planetary and the individual. The result of this is often the collapsing of those dualities and the flattening of the differences between them. To be aware of our planetary being ecologically or sociopolitically, however, is to be self-conscious of the overlapping frameworks within which we operate, the distinctions between them, and the way in which they are complexly interwoven. Such an awareness can nonetheless only be partial or compromised, incommensurable with the totalizing imperative of planetary consciousness. As Spivak writes,

Alterity remains underived from us, it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away . . . what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous.²

The African American poet Ed Roberson's (b. 1939) work engages with this incommensurability, this simultaneous continuity and discontinuity, by facing up to ways in which we are alienated from our planetary being. His poetry therefore offers a response to alterity, opacity, and the sublime realization of one's place within a magnitude that is both incomprehensible and intimate; both us and other.

In "We Must Be Careful," a short prose piece Roberson contributed to the collection *Black Nature* (2009), he writes that there is "no humanly containable limit to living Nature; there is no outside of Nature."³ Nature poetry therefore occurs "when an individual's sense of the larger Earth enters into the world of human knowledge," and the ecopoetic is the understanding "that the world's desires do *not* run the Earth, but the Earth *does* run the world."⁴

The discontinuity between world and Earth, and the characterization of the latter as autonomous and oblivious to the "world's desires" reveals something particular about Roberson's approach to nature. As he writes, "Nature is not a caring mother addressed solely to our needs; the Earth has no perception of us as we see ourselves." The "world"—a stand-in for human society perhaps, or for a human perspective—is contained within the "Earth" in ways that the former experiences as disjunctive. While we as a species may be intimately bound up with the processes and outcomes of an ecological, planetary being, with our well-being determined by, for example, the level of carbon in the

atmosphere and the plastic pollution of the biosphere, the alterity Spivak highlighted remains ever-present. Nature poetry, or planetary poetry as Roberson conceives of it, must face up to that alterity and respect the autonomy it implies because the health of the planet remains the ultimate determinant of our survival—the earth that runs the world, rather than the other way around.

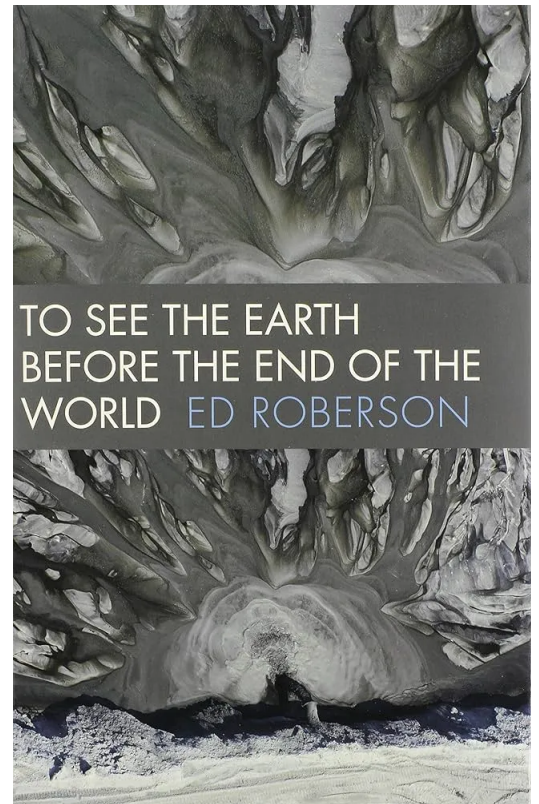
Roberson explores these themes in his 2010 book *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*, a remarkably prescient collection given the developments of the last decade and a half, particularly the escalation of the climate crisis and the reactionary and intransigent political forces that now stand opposed to climate action. The title poem returns us to the disjunction between two forms of planetary consciousness, the world and the earth:

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.⁵

Notably, it is the world that is ending here, not the earth, but it is the latter that has been made into an object of spectacle. The “world’s death” dwarfs human existence, but it also contains us. Roberson seems to be saying that the processes of extinction have been turned into a commodity, a spectacle, in ways that make apparent how alterity is co-opted, even as it signals destruction. The poem continues:

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
the mile ago it takes to stop the train,
the small bay to coast the liner into the ground.⁶

Roberson shows us how the disjunctions of scale between ecological totality and human perception can, at times, be overcome. This occurs in moments of crisis, when



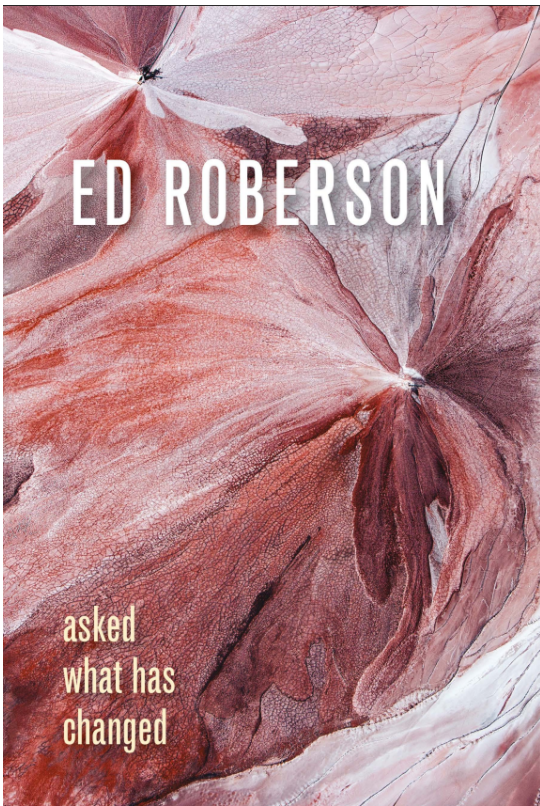
Ed Roberson's To See the Earth Before the End of the World (2010). © Wesleyan University Press. All rights reserved.

“endings of the world” overlap with “lived time” and an awareness of the planetary in which the world and Earth align becomes evident. At these times we are forced to confront the velocity of crisis, the time between the disaster’s trigger and the resulting destruction. The gradual realization that the runaway threat of climate change will not be effectively halted comes to mind here. This passage also shows how spatial and temporal juxtapositions function in Roberson’s work; particularly in highlighting disparities of scale. His poetry operates through a form of montage in which images are overlaid so that the poem moves between discrepant temporal or perceptual frameworks in a way that brings home the nonsynchronous nature of each. Roberson writes:

That very subtlety of time between
large and small
Media note *people chasing glaciers*
in retreat up their valleys and *the speed . . .*
watched ice was speed made invisible,
now— it’s days, and a few feet further away,
a subtle collapse of time between large
and our small human extinction.⁷

The temporal stratification that separates the deep time of the planetary and the formation of glaciers, and the human timescale in which they are disappearing, is represented as a subtle variation, a “subtle collapse,” perhaps suggesting that these temporal scales are not so separate. “Media note,” the ironic comment goes, that people are chasing glaciers as they retreat, the speed of which leaves only awestruck, sublime silence. This sense of the sublime figures the realization of the depth of humanity’s impact on the natural world, a natural world that has been doubly traduced by being commodified as media spectacle as it disappears. “Our small human extinction” is the reminder that these processes, despite operating on timescales far exceeding our own, are intimately connected to our individual and collective actions and are the result of anthropogenic climate change—a realization that human actions operate on planetary scales, even if this remains hard to comprehend on an individual level.

As Roberson’s work shows, poetry may be the art form most suited to reflections on the planetary given its ability to juxtapose the minor and the major, the lyric “I” and the collective “we,” and the ecological and the social spheres. Roberson excels at these juxtapositions, using them to reveal the overlapping frames of knowledge, perception, and identity that constitute contemporary experience. As he writes in “Wine-Dark Sea” from 2022’s *Asked What Has Changed*:



Ed Roberson's Asked What Has Changed (2022). © Wesleyan University Press. All rights reserved.

The amount of water a blue whale must feel
along its skin from its nose to its tail
a hundred feet away must fill
an Olympic size pool of thought.

. . .

The oceanic glaze of the planet paints all
this

a hot minute on a hot rock
in a cold sky cloud mists
of star galaxies —

Inches from my fingertips a cold drink
the thin slice of a spherical lime
wheels a glorious drunkenness. Does the
whale

feel the whole ocean, the planet roll off it?

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Jumping from the ecological to the human and
then to the planetary, Roberson frames perception as a
form of palimpsestic spatial awareness, one that
extends outward from the body of the whale to the

entire planet, the experience of which “wheels” a glorious drunkenness—a vertigo at the
vertiginous scope of the planetary perception suggested here. The question of whether
the whale has any planetary consciousness frames our human models of planetary health
and well-being as insufficient, if it does not include this form of more-than-human
awareness.

Many of Roberson’s poems ultimately testify to the sublime disjunction of the
competing imperatives of the planetary and the individual, or the ecological and the
social, and to the awareness of how these incommensurable frameworks, despite their
nonsynchronous nature, remain profoundly interwoven. Without making any grand claims
with regard to planetary awareness, his work reveals that literature’s affective potential
can shine a light on our contemporary exposure to the disjunctive, crisis-inflected
experience of planetary being.

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Imperative to Re-Imagine the Planet,” in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 338. ↩

2. Ibid., 339. ↩

3. Ed Roberson, “We Must Be Careful,” in *Black Nature*, ed. Camille T. Dungy (University of Georgia Press, 2009), 3. ↩
4. Ibid., 4. Italics in original. ↩
5. Ed Roberson, “To See the Earth Before the End of the World,” in *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 3. ↩
6. Ibid., 3. ↩
7. Ibid., 3. ↩
8. Ed Roberson, “Wine-Dark Sea,” in *Asked What Has Changed* (Wesleyan University Press, 2021), 37. ↩

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Planetary health has so far been predominantly studied by natural scientists and medical experts. Over the next few months we will publish a series of essays that illuminate different aspects of the planetary-health concept from a decidedly environmental-humanities perspective. The entries have their origin in the contributions of international scholars who attended the Rachel Carson Center workshop “Imagining Planetary Health, Well-Being, and Habitability,” convened by Lijuan Klassen and Christof Mauch and sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation.

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