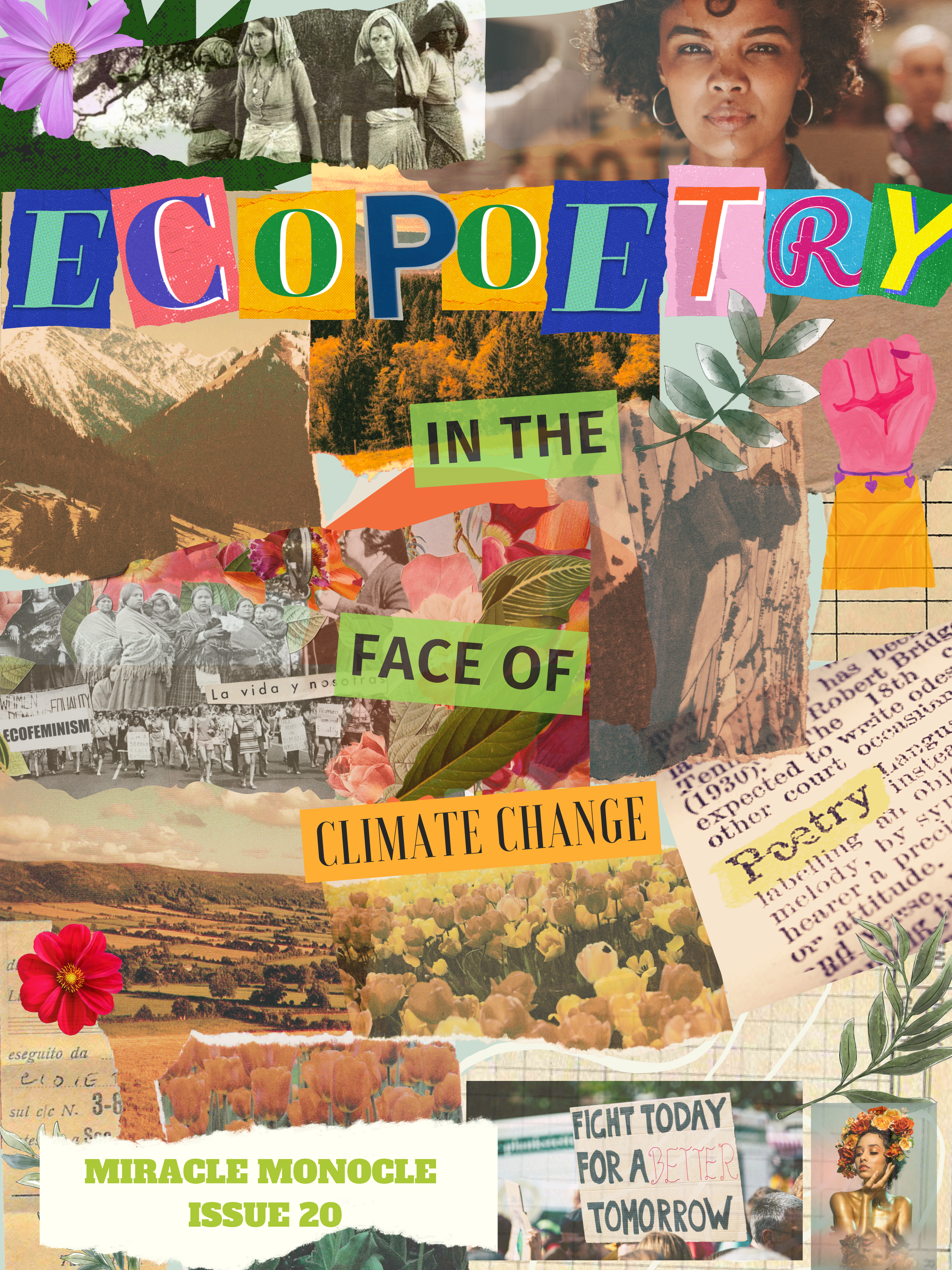
ECOPOETRY

IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE



MIRACLE MONOCLE
ISSUE 20

A Digital RoundTable
by Ayaat Ismail

Writers:

Ann Fisher-Wirth

Craig Perez

Melissa Tuckey

WRITERS

Ann Fisher-Wirth

Ann Fisher-Wirth's seventh book of poems, *Paradise Is Jagged*, has just been published by *Terrapin Books*; her sixth is *The Bones of Winter Birds*, and her fifth, a poetry/photography collaboration with Maude Schuyler Clay, is Mississippi. With Laura-Gray Street, Ann coedited *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. A senior fellow of The Black Earth Institute, she received the 2023 Governor's Award for Excellence in Poetry from the Mississippi Arts Commission. Professor Emerita of English at the University of Mississippi, she also directed the program in Environmental Studies.

Craig Santos Perez

Craig Santos Perez is a Pacific Islander writer and environmentalist from Guam. He is the author of six books of poetry, including a collection of ecopoetry *Habitat Threshold* (2020), and the co-editor of six anthologies, most recently Indigenuos Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures (2022). He teaches in the English department at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

Melissa Tuckey

Melissa Tuckey is a poet, literary activist and teaching artist. She is author of *Tenuous Chapel*, a book of poems and *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology*. She's a former Poet Laureate of Tompkins County, and an emeritus fellow at Black Earth Institute. She served as founding co-director of Split This Rock, a literary organization supporting socially engaged work. She lives in Ithaca, NY.

THIS JUST in

Digital Roundtable

We assembled a panel of esteemed writers, including Ann Fisher-Wirth, Craig Santos Perez, and Melissa Tuckey, to explore the power of eco-poetry.

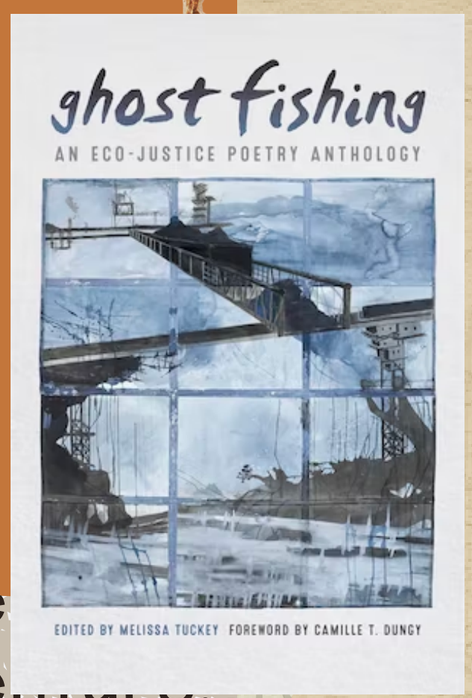
Ecopoetry is a genre that utilizes evocative language and imagery to bring attention to the urgent matter of climate change. As a pressing issue with severe consequences for our environment, wildlife, and human populations, it is crucial to raise awareness and promote action.

By engaging readers through creative and unique means, ecopoetry sheds light on the significance of comprehending the effects of climate change on our natural world. We are thrilled to share our panel's insights and their creative works that inspire and move us to take action towards a more sustainable future.

ECOLOGY

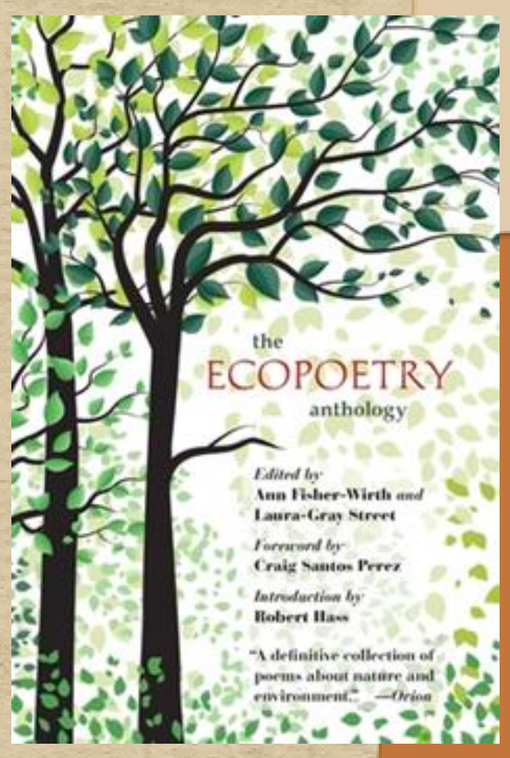
Make A DIFFERENCE

AI: *Ghost Fishing* was published in 2018 and *The Ecopoetry Anthology* was published in 2013. What, in your thinking, has changed since then? What has stayed the same?



CSP: I was honored to have work included in Melissa's and Ann's important anthologies. Since then, there have been several other anthologies to appear, both in the US and internationally. This signals to me that there is much more interest in eco-poetry in general and climate poetry in particular. This mirrors the growing global awareness of climate change in the public through various media. What has stayed the same is that climate change continues to be an existential threat to all of humanity, the planet, and more-than-human species, and that many inspiring people (poets included) have continued to raise awareness of climate change through poetry.

AFW: Ecopoetry continues to proliferate, as more and more poets seek to concern themselves with environmental issues and worsening global warming, with all its catastrophic side effects. The work that may be called ecopoetry is so widespread and so varied that it would not be possible to categorize it easily; the voices are coming with beauty and urgency from all over the world.



MT: I agree with Craig and Ann, ecopoetry and eco-justice poetry are growing and full of innovation. I see recognition of social justice as a central aspect of environmental crisis, more cultural diversity in conversations, and shifts around how we conceive of our relationship to nature. I also see more ecojustice poetry in journals and conversations.

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AI: As climate disasters, accelerate and human displacement becomes less possible for those not directly impacted to ignore, do you anticipate a shift in the rhetoric or the tone of the poetry that engages the subject of the ecology?

CSP: In some ways, this shift has already been happening as more and more poets are addressing issues of climate change, human displacement, and refugee crises around the world. I would not necessarily say there is a shift in tone or rhetoric since every poet speaks in their own unique voice and style, but I would say that there is an undercurrent of urgency, empathy, and grief in most of this work.

AFW: I agree with Craig. But I would not like to define the parameters of ecopoetry too narrowly. There is room for a paean to spring, as there has always been, and there is room for a highly technical, scientific examination of toxicities in the body, as in Adam Dickinson's book *Anatomic*–and everything in between. One thing that has changed over the past few decades, I think, is the increased awareness of ways in which environmental misuse and damage impact human communities so that environmental justice and social justice cannot be separated.

MT: I agree this shift is already in progress, as Ann and Craig note. We are living in a time of instability, not just because of climate change and environmental crisis, but also due to war and economic and social inequities. Poets are grappling with all this as well as the loss of beloved habitats and animal and plant species, and the impact of migration and dislocation. There is no one tone or rhetoric that can hold all of this, there are many. I also think it's important to recognize that poets have been writing these poems for generations. Indigenous poets have been telling these stories and writing these poems also for generations. Poets writing in the borderlands. Poets writing about the slave trade and northern migration. It's all here and has been all along.

AI: What is the best way to deal with the problem that our exploitation of the planet and of one another stem from the same mentality?

CSP: We must change the mentality that nature and animals only exist for humans to control and exploit. We must transform our consciousness in order to see the earth as sacred and animals as our kin. We must imagine that all things are interconnected and interrelated, and thus we should treat everything with respect, care, and love. Poetry is one important way for us to transform the imagination, which we hope will lead to the transformation of society.

AFW: Again, I agree with Craig. We must fight a capitalist mentality that sees value only in terms of profit and human worth only in terms of wealth.

MT: Poetry, of course! Poetry is the great connector. I created *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology* for this reason. We have so much to learn and so little time. Poetry is a great way to shift the frameworks with which we view the world, build shared culture, and access the imagination necessary to confront our grief and create change.

AI: Have you noticed a big change in your work over the past several years as a result of potential new engagement and growing public awareness about our ecosystem?

CSP: Yes, much more of my work has focused on climate change in recent years. One example is that even though I grew up on a tropical Pacific Island, my most recent poetry book includes a poem about glaciers. Glaciers were not something I had ever encountered growing up, but I learned about glaciers through the growing public media coverage of melting glaciers and the role they play in our ecosystem.

AFW: Not so much. I became involved with the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in 1992 when it was founded. I began directing the Interdisciplinary Minor in Environmental Studies at the University of Mississippi and began working on *The Ecopoetry Anthology* around 2006. So these environmental concerns have been on my mind and have been central to my poetry for quite some time.

MT: The public interest in these topics has led to more opportunities to collaborate across disciplines and more opportunities to reach the public. I've had the opportunity to read and teach poetry at climate change and environmental conferences, as well as collaborate with visual artists and musicians. These interdisciplinary opportunities create a lot of energy and bring people to poetry who may not have realized they need it. People often tell me that poetry gives them hope. I do think there is a hunger out there for language and meaning and culture generally—and poets have a lot to offer the environmental justice movement.

AI: Who are some new voices we should be paying attention to in the eco-poetry community?

CSP: As an editor, I work to raise awareness about Pacific Islanders authors. An anthology that I co-edited, Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures, was just published by the University of Hawai'i Press and features many wonderful Pacific voices writing about ecology, environmental justice, and climate change.

AFW: Not new, but pre-eminently: Brenda Hillman, Camille Dungy, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder. In some cases new to me, at least: all the poets whom Laura-Gray Street and I included in the issue of Global South (see my bio, above). Also, *About Place Journal*, which is the journal of the Black Earth Institute, publishes many new and established writers from around the world.

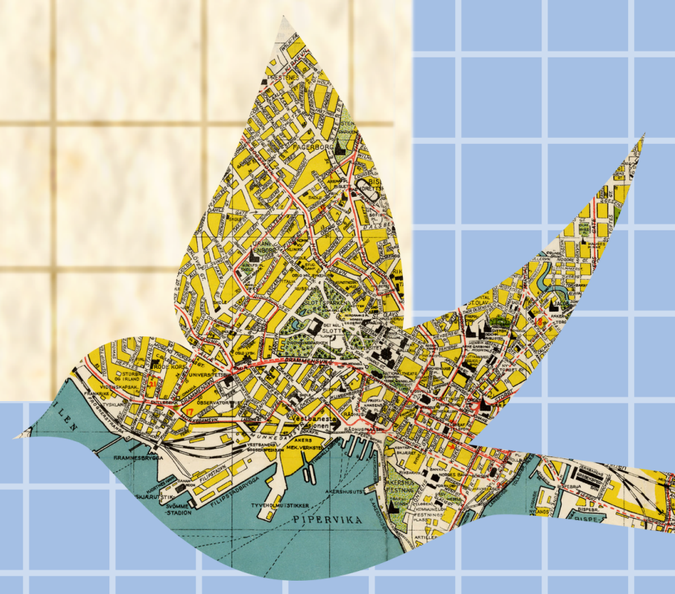
MT: Also not new voices, but here are some recent eco-centered books to pay attention to Alison Hedge Coke's *Look at This Blue*; Hila Ratzabi's debut book, *Look at These Woods*; Donika Kelly *The Renunciations*; Pam Ushuck, *Refugee*; Jennifer Foerster, *The Maybe Bird*; Ann Haven McDonnell, *Breath of Coal*; Ed Roberson, *Asked What has Changed*; Petra Kuppers, *Gut Botony*; Yusef Komunyakka *Everyday Mojo Songs of the Earth: New and Selected Poems*, Ada Limon, *The Hurting Kind* and so much more.

AI: Put in a more general way, if you were compiling an eco-justice anthology for the moment, which intersections would you be most interested in drawing to the fore?

CSP: Since I just compiled a new anthology, I will say that the intersections that Pacific writers are bringing to the fore link climate change and environmental justice to the legacy and ongoing impacts of militarism, nuclearism, colonialism, and the pandemic.

AFW: My focus would be more on the incredible diversity of voices–all types of poetry, all types of concerns, from all over the world– than on intersections.

MT: I will leave that to the next burning soul though I think a collection from poets under 30 on the environmental crisis would be powerful.



AI: Do you find that there is more space for poems that engage concepts of eco-justice in the literary journal landscape? What are some venues that are doing this work well?

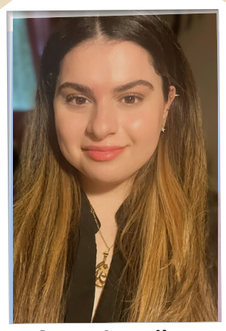
CSP: Yes, several new anthologies and journals have appeared that either focus entirely on eco-poetry or include special issues on eco-poetry. In terms of journals, I recommend *About Place, Ecotone, Terrain.org, The Tiger Moth Review,* and *The EcoTheo Review*.

AFW: Yes. The places Craig names, and also *Shenandoah, The Kenyon Review*, a wonderful new journal called the *Plant-Human Collective, RockPaperPoem*, *On the Seawall*, and many others.

MT: I would add, *The Quarry at Split This Rock, Orion Magazine, Emergence Magazine,* and *Cutthroat*.

REFLECTIONS

This digital roundtable interview provided me and hopefully others valuable insights into eco-poetry and the ways in which poets engage with environmental issues and climate change through their work. Melissa Tuckey, Craig Santos Perez, and Ann Fisher-Wirth shared their experiences and perspectives, highlighting the growth and diversification of eco-poetry and the ongoing threat of climate change. While much has changed since the publication of *Ghost Fishing* and *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, the urgency and importance of addressing environmental issues through poetry remains as critical as ever. This roundtable offers a glimpse into the diverse and innovative ways in which poets are responding to the challenges of our time, and serves as an inspiration to those seeking to engage with these issues through the power of words.



Ayaat Ismail

I am currently a lecturer at Uofl, where I teach FYC courses. Starting this fall, I will be pursuing my Ph.D. degree in English at Michigan State University. As a writer, I am dedicated to enriching audiences with diverse voices, bringing attention to underrepresented perspectives, and initiating meaningful conversations on topics of identity and inclusion. My passion lies in exploring the intricate connections between gender, ethnicity, space, and place in minority literature while centering marginalized voices.