

## Barbara Laiolo-March interviews John Shoptaw

John Shoptaw's first book of poetry, *Times Beach*, won the 2015 Notre Dame Review Book Prize and the 2016 Northern California Book Award in Poetry. Described by past US Poet Laureate Robert Hass as at once "American history, environmental history, inventive, challenging, rich and ambitious," *Times Beach* departs from the "I" normal of poetry today for a world of invention and irony. Shoptaw mixes a gentle facetious humor with parody, political statement and a sense of his place in this Mississippi River watershed.

BLM – You've said that much of *Times Beach* was written in Berkeley, California. I'm reminded of Steinbeck who wrote *East of Eden* in Manhattan. Did the geographic and cultural distance between Missouri and California afford you perspective?

JS – Your mention of Steinbeck reminds me that I too began *Times Beach* in Manhattan, drafting "Itasca," about the beginning of the Mississippi, on the Upper West Side in the summer of 2001 around the corner from where Gershwin wrote *Rhapsody in Blue*. I like the way you put it. There is indeed quite a distance between the Missouri Bootheel and the California East Bay, which made the book harder to write but I hope also made it better. For all the difficulties I had in not being able to go out and visit a place –in having to look up instead of look at things –I did find an unexpected benefit in constantly reminding myself that *Times Beach* was to be a work of translation, and as such my task was to draw in poetry readers who may have never seen the Mississippi, except perhaps through an airplane window.

BLM –Does a poet or writer have to be of a place to write about it?

JS – I hope not. Travel poetry shows us places unfiltered by familiarity and from weird angles resulting from the negation of the poet's own familiar places (I'm not in Missouri anymore!). I myself have never visited Lake Itasca, nor did Keats ever stand "Silent, upon a peak in Darien" (the Isthmus of Panama). And neither of us could experience what the early non-native explorers, Balboa and Schoolcraft, felt when they re-discovered places. How long does a writer need to be in a place to be of a place, capable of writing something compelling about it? A lifetime, and no time at all.

BLM – It took 12 years to write *Times Beach*. Though you left the region it seems it is in your marrow and that this book demanded to be written. What kept you going? Now that it's done are you free?

JS – Yes, the book took twelve summers of writing, teaching and parenting, during which I recast some poems and cast some aside others (a long poem nobody misses on the death of the keel boatman Mike Fink), and occasionally cast myself into despair over ever finishing. I began *Times Beach* as a way of avoiding the autobiographical first book by telling the life in the big river

floodplains– the Missouri, and then the Mississippi just below mouth of the Ohio –where I had grown up. About half way through, I kept running into myself and had to turn off in another direction as though we were no longer on speaking terms. So like Dr. Frankenstein and his monster, I gave in to the inevitable and let my Swamp-east Missouri self into the story. The river, of course, keeps on doing what the songs say. I thought I was done with my book when the lower Mississippi flooded my home town. In a few hours, my childhood home became a sandbagged river island. To bring my dozen years of writing to a close, I needed a river-road poem. And so I drove along the Mississippi from my Bootheel to the river’s bird-foot delta, listening to floodplainers all along the way. And now, I confess, I have an almost vertiginous sense of liberation: I can write about anything, and so far I’ve written about almost nothing but the Mississippi.

BLM –Rather than a paean to place, several of the poems, most notably the one about the death of the town of Times Beach expose environmental degradation and human loss. Others delineate personality flaws and weaknesses of known and unknown historic figures. I hear the smirk in your voice in *Such Was Lucy Jefferson Lewis’ Hold*. You had some fun.

JS – It’s true, I don’t ever simply celebrate and sing my place. Things never were the way they used to be. Even in the book’s opening, from “Blues Haiku” –“I want to blur from a tupelo stump, like a crawfish / In an endangered swamp” –my admiration is tinged with a feeling of loss and hazard. I made “Times Beach” my title poem partly because the place was incinerated after being laced with dioxin, and no longer exists. However I first imagined it, *Times Beach* became an environmental poetry of place. On the other hand, I do try to give people, and other animals, their due. Lucy Jefferson, sister of Thomas Jefferson and cousin of Meriwether Lewis, is one of a number of people caught up in the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811 and 1812. (New Madrid is my home county.) Some, like Tecumseh and the enslaved George, are impressive; others, such as Lucy’s son Lilburne, are despicable, and Audubon is exemplary in attending to what his horse knows of the quake before he does. And then there’s a migratory herd of squirrels with a group psychology not unlike our own. The quake wasn’t any creature’s fault (so to speak), but the sequence “Shuffle” brings out the best and the worst in them.

BLM –How was *Times Beach* received in the Missouri Bootheel?

JS – I’m not sure it’s arrived yet. Before the book appeared, I used to console myself with Jesus’ rueful maxim that a prophet isn’t honored in his own home country. I wasn’t writing to bottom-dwellers, but from them. I’m excited, though, to be reading at the Missouri History Museum in St. Louis, where T.S. Eliot read late in his career, so maybe the book’s reception will thaw.

BLM – Our country has exited the Paris Climate Accords. Do American poets have an obligation to respond and what form should that response take?

JS – Trump notwithstanding, I’m still in accord with Paris—along with other poets, environmental or otherwise. And I’m sure many of us will feel called upon to civilly and imaginatively disobey. But poetry, as Kenneth Burke wrote, can also take symbolic action. What can poets do as poets? Maybe they can change minds and hearts with their poems, though they may never know. I tried with *Times Beach* to write an environmental book, where place is not a backdrop but a matrix (my swampland with its bald cypresses, cotton fields, woodpeckers, black bears, and saw millers). In my ecopoetry, a person is an event, somebody who could have taken place nowhere else.

BLM – Will we poets, compulsive examiners, be able to give ourselves up to something bigger than ourselves?

JS – Yes, we must think big as well as small. Yet I also believe that if we want readers to feel what we’re writing about, we shouldn’t lose sight of ourselves. We might see something bigger through ourselves, and ourselves through something bigger. Yet again, as Frost memorably put it, “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.” When it comes to the natural world, the known and felt fact is worth the poet’s labors.

BLM – This quote from your UC Berkeley web page, “If you’re not a green poet, whatever other kind of poet you are, you’re not paying attention,” prompts me to paraphrase, “If you’re not an active, investigative poet, whatever other kind of poet you are, you’re not paying attention.” Can you give me a word to describe what poetry must be today?

JS – Responsive. Though, from what all I’m reading, that engagement can take any number of forms. As for me, I am constantly trying to rethink our tenuous and changing relations on our only planet. Ecopoetry, or eco-justice poetry, hasn’t superseded Nature poetry. The rhetoric of persuasion, of making us care about a place or a being in that place by falling in love with its description, is still fundamental. But nature poetry can look complacent, like a game preserve or a private garden, if it edits out contaminations. Even love poetry, if it’s green poetry, will be different. Where are we loving? How does our love sustain itself on a planet where the days as we’ve known them seem numbered?

BLM – And finally, would you like to share your current project?

JS – If you’ve read this far, you won’t be surprised to learn that I’ve been writing a number of environmental poems lately. Climate change is the elephant in the room, but elephants themselves are on the verge of extinction because of a global market that has nothing to do with global warming. In *Times Beach* I wrote a number of long sequences; I want in the next book to write lots of short poems. We’ll see if I can contain myself.

John Shoptaw is a Continuing Lecturer in English at UC Berkeley. Other work includes *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry*; the libretto for the opera *My American Cousin*; and the

essay “Why Ecopoetry?” (in *Poetry Magazine*). Poems from *Times Beach* appeared in *The Colorado Review*, *Common Knowledge*, *The New Yorker*, *Notre Dame Review*, *A Smartish Pace*, and elsewhere.

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