



Taylor Brorby

Interview with Simmons Buntin

The American Desert Southwest is at the front line of ecological instability and environmental change. It's also produced great writing, both poetry and prose, and Simmons Buntin, who founded the online journal *Terrain.org* helps us understand our place and as well as understand how we create place. Beyond his work with *Terrain.org*, Buntin is a noted urban and regional planner, whose recent book *Unsprawl: Remixing Spaces as Places* (coauthored with Ken Pirie) is a collection of sustainable community case studies. He is also an accomplished poet, whose two collections *Riverfall* and *Bloom*, are published by Salmon Poetry. He lives near Tucson, Arizona.

Taylor Brorby: As a writer, how do you see your literary work influenced by your study and interest in urban and regional planning? Does one area of knowledge help influence how you work in the other?

Simmons Buntin: My studies in urban and regional planning opened a whole new way of thinking and being for me. It was like the birth of a child, though a lot less tiring. What I mean is this: There was a whole way of existing that (as a kid of rural and suburban upbringing) I'd seen but never thought much about. And like having a child, it's a form of love, I think. Previously, I only appreciated and felt that indefinable "at oneness" in natural landscapes—the Sonoran desert or the subtropical central Florida forests I grew up in, for example. It wasn't until I attended grad school in downtown Denver that I felt a real connection to the city—to any city, but particularly of course to Denver, a wonderful urban canvas—great walkable

neighborhoods, mass transit, street trees, grassy parks, an architectural heritage, brewpubs, and the awesomeness that is Coors Field and the lower downtown resurgence it spurred. In grad school I learned intimately about urban form and design, as well as the social constructs of neighborhood planning. Suddenly architectural form spoke to me as much as the ponderosa pines in the mountains west of Denver. Then I began to think about place as a construct that we create, not a separation of “built and natural environments” (despite *Terrain.org*’s subtitle). And so I wrote in that frame of mind. In my writing, I believe that’s most evident in the poems in my first book, *Riverfall*, compared to my second, *Bloom*. Though *Riverfall* was published in 2005, most of the poems were written in the 1990s, before I attended grad school. There’s nary a mention of a city or suburb or building, even, in the collection. Lots of birds and forests and deserts, though. In *Bloom*, published in 2010, we’re still serenaded by birds, but urban form—particularly the urban/suburban interface—is much more prominent. My prose shows that influence even more. My first essay following grad school, for example, was titled “The Good Suburb,” published in *The Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society*.

TB: *Terrain.org* brings together a strong and disparate group of editors. How do you balance each person’s aesthetic with the overall mission and vision of the journal?

SB: If I say “with an iron fist,” will my editors get mad at me...? For years I edited the entirety that is *Terrain.org* by myself, reviewing and choosing the contributions in each genre and for each issue. Following my (other) graduate degree in creative writing, I began to divest myself—both for my sanity and the journal’s. I started with fiction, then nonfiction and poetry. Today we have genre editors for those literary legs as well as reviews, interviews, and the ARTerrain gallery. The first thing I noticed was the difference in aesthetic because (shockingly!) everyone

has a different style. I found this to be the case particularly in genres like fiction and, more recently, the ARTerrain gallery. And I find that to be really healthy for *Terrain.org* because it helps us grow as a journal, expanding what defines us and bringing more readers our way. While I still have the authority to overrule an editor on accepting a submission, our genre editors have full editorial oversight and decision-making. I trust them wholly. They're doing a lot of work, and getting paid only in my sincere thanks. I believe they must own that genre—that it is an extension of who they are personally, that it's a point of pride, that it therefore represents the best of what they want the digital place-based literary world to be.

TB: For you, why is it important to have art as an integral part to a journal such as *Terrain.org*?

SB: The literary magazines I most admire, including *Orion* and *The Sun*, have gallery sections or incorporate visual art so stunningly that I couldn't think of *Terrain.org* without also incorporating visual art (and aural art, for that matter, given our multimedia platform). *Orion* particularly has been a big influence on our work, aesthetically and ethically, I'd say. At its heart, *Orion* is about beauty, about creating a community of readers and writers in the pursuit of a more beautiful, habitable world. *Terrain.org* is likewise about beauty of the built and natural environments—whether in the places we love, or art and literature, or sustainable design, or conversations and editorials.

Fortunately, *Terrain.org* does not have the cost and other limitations of a print journal when it comes to using full-color images. Our only limitation is the viewer's bandwidth, and I'm hoping they're okay with us sacrificing a bit of that by offering large, stunning images throughout our site, in addition to the ARTerrain gallery. Many of our nonfiction contributions include image

galleries, as do the Unsprawl case studies. Check out Lyn Baldwin's "Laura's Collection," for example—it's an essay on place collected through botanic field work, and includes two gorgeous galleries of Lyn's field journals and paintings.

TB: How has being a writer influenced your work as an editor? How has being an editor influenced your work as a writer?

SB: I'll tell you, given that I have a full-time job and family, it's difficult to fit both in these days. But that doesn't quite answer your question, I realize. I like to think that editing other work makes me more critical of my own writing, and therefore helps me produce better work. I think the benefit is mostly in that direction, though; I'm not convinced that my own writing influences my editing. But I will say this, because I think it's important to who I am as a writer and editor: If I had to choose—and I often do have to choose since I have so little time—I take editing over my own writing. I do that because I believe it makes a bigger difference in the world. Don't get me wrong: I think I have something important to say as a writer, particularly about community and sustainability. But by editing *Terrain.org*, I get to help bring so many other writers and artists to the world, free of charge and free of ads, in an interface itself that is built from hard work (mine and others), passion and compassion, beauty and love. To me, that's no small matter.

TB: Could you speak about your approach to editing a journal such as *Terrain.org*?

SB: *Terrain.org* is all about context. That was more visible, I think, when we published issues (two or three a year until early 2014). Now we publish on a rolling schedule, aiming for three contributions per week. The context still, however, is how the pieces relate to each other and to

the built and natural environments—which is to say, to place and our place in place. While some journals struggle as to who they are, what place they take up from a literary or thematic perspective, I feel right at home with our place-based focus. Then again, is there anywhere or anyone who isn't of place? If so, I want to include that, too! Placelessness—it has defined more than one generation, to be sure.

Wait, that's more philosophy than practical approach. To the latter, then, I say: Sunday feels like a good day, usually, to read, review, discuss, and put together the upcoming week's contributions (as I'm also the web guy). But no day in this online editorial week is sacred, I'm afraid to report. There's always good work to be done.

TB: From your vantage point, what is the current landscape of nonfiction writing?

SB: The landscape of nonfiction is as accessible as it has ever been, and with online publications like *Terrain.org*, probably more accessible than it's ever been. I mean that both from a writing and reading/viewing landscape. I mentioned Lyn's wonderful essay above, taking "nonfiction" out of just a textual context. But we also see more lyrical nonfiction (or prose poetry?), braided essays (probably my favorite form), photo essays, video essays, and then more traditional forms like the long personal essay, myth and epic, journalistic essays, and technical articles. Heck, we'll take it all at *Terrain.org**, one of the things about us I really like. Due to the internet, the Renaissance of literature continues, I think, regardless of genre.

** Quality being the critical factor in us taking it, of course. Define that as you will.*

TB: For you, as an editor, what makes for a compelling piece of writing?

SB: Surprise, delight, ingenuity, a command of the craft, a good question, a new take, wisdom.

TB: Journals come and journals go—with over 400,000 visits per year to *Terrain.org*, why do you believe there is a demand for a journal such as *Terrain.org*? What does *Terrain.org* do that no other journal does?

SB: *Terrain.org* has been publishing online since 1998, so at a minimum what we have is a damn persistent publisher and editor-in-chief (which is to say, me). But that's not a sustainable proposition for the long term, so we have an international editorial board and genre and assistant editors. *Terrain.org* is an organization comprised of a group of committed folks. Unpaid, mind you, but committed. We are also in the process of gaining fiscal sponsorship and, ultimately, getting our nonprofit incorporation. Anyone care to offer up bookkeeping services?

Demand. I think *Terrain.org* offers something you don't find anywhere else, though I have seen some excellent new place-based journals online, particularly those focusing on the more technical aspects of creating community, designing place. So we've transitioned just a bit in response to that, landing a bit more on the literary and artistic side, though we'll continue to offer our Unsprawl case studies a couple times a year. I think demand is driven by that unique overlap of literary and technical work, our multimedia presentation, free access and an ad-free environment, the exploration of the built and natural environments, the discourse that ensues. But the numbers of readers aren't high enough, particularly if I compare *Terrain.org* to the other leading online publications. We're working on that, though—still, suggestions are welcome.

TB: Finally, any advice for writers who hope to place their writing in *Terrain.org*?

SB: My base advice for any writer who feels she or he is ready to submit is to spend some time with the journal—read a few contributions in your genre, and then read a few not in your genre. Then follow our submission guidelines. Just as important—and of course everyone says this: send us your best work. Some writers still insist that the quality in online journals isn't as high as in print journals, and so I'm certain they're not sending their best work. Poppycock! *Terrain.org* is very competitive—we are critical readers. This is our baby, after all, and we have the history to prove the quality of our work.