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The Ecopoetics of Space: How Contemporary American Poetics Can Help Posthumans Navigate a Postnatural World

Amber Pearson
THE ECOPOEICS OF SPACE:
HOW CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETICS CAN HELP POSTHUMANS NAVIGATE
A POSTNATURAL WORLD

By

AMBER PEARSON

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Amber Pearson defended this dissertation on June 19, 2013.
The members of the supervisory committee were:

Andrew Epstein
Professor Directing Dissertation

Frederick Davis
University Representative

Leigh Edwards
Committee Member

Eric Walker
Committee Member

Paul Outka
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the dissertation has been approved in accordance with university requirements.
To my family and friends, for believing all this was a good idea.
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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, ecopoetics has been interested in texts whose primary goal is to explore place, or locations that are imbued with human meaning or culture, as a solution to the problem of human alienation from the nonhuman world. While this work is valuable, placemaking alone is insufficient to meet contemporary needs, and as a result poetry which explores space, or the nonhuman that resists human understanding, is needed. To this end I describe a lineage of spatially-engaged, experimental American poetics that is consistent with contemporary ecocritical practice. First I examine Charles Olson, who rejected the possibility of simple, mimetic language in favor of deliberately constructed ways of understanding the world through myth, giving us postmodernism. Following Olson, James Schuyler’s even stronger acceptance of limitation in language is coupled with a total acceptance of the way things are and an avant-garde writing style, leaving us with not just a constructed world, but a postnatural one. Intensifying both the suspicion of both language and its users is Lyn Hejinian, whose challenging of the way nature constructs its users asks us to reconfigure both the world and humans. The result of this challenge is to create a posthuman nonidentity in response to a spatial world. Through this traumatic experience, readers learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable: to be posthumans in a spatial environment. The result is a significant opportunity for what Timothy Morton calls “dark ecology”: a way of maintaining solidarity with a damaged, toxic, hostile planet. Through reading spatial ecopoetics, posthumans can find ways to live in and identify with the 21st century’s postnatural world.
“In a world properly attuned to the environment, we would read poems with an eye to ecology, no matter what their content.” Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*

Historically, one of the most troubling problems for ecocritics has always been to join critical and political concerns: what is this work good for? For ecocritics, the material conditions of the world are at stake as well as more traditional poetic concerns such as aesthetics. Ecocritics are at all times aware of their responsibility to explore and mediate the inescapable relationship between the human and the nonhuman, particularly as human behavior can lead to serious consequences for the nonhuman. The most common move when looking for poetry that can address both the material as well as the aesthetic is to look at what we might typically think of as “nature” or “activist” poetry. This poetry, which focuses on what we typically think of as “natural” or “wild” subjects and events, works to place humans in nonhuman environments and to generate activist politics in order to motivate environmentally-responsible human behavior.

However, contemporary ecocritical practice has shifted from understanding humans as coherent and holistic in opposition to a wild, exterior nature to the posthuman in a postnatural world, which may require a different approach. From such a point of view, traditional environmentalist poetry can seem like a way of whistling past the graveyard. In 2012’s “Green Reading: Modern and Contemporary American Poetry and Environmental Criticism,” Lynn Keller suggests that there is a strangeness in the way ecocriticism tends still to focus on English

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literature’s pastoral tradition even though people like William Cronon\(^2\) have successfully analyzed how literary “nature” or “wilderness” ideas present problems for current ecocriticism, environmentalism, and people in general, especially as it’s all inherently based on an idea that humans are apart from nature—there’s a painful and problematic dualism being reified in all these narratives:

If we concur with Cronon that ‘[i]n its flights from history, in its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside nature—in all these ways, [the American construction of] wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century’ (81), then it behooves environmental critics to consider the extent to which the poetry we associate with nature or wilderness represents such an ideology and to explore alternative perspectives that other types of poetry might offer. (Keller 603)

Not only is it the case that the needs and interests of literary environmentalist theory are not being met by the current ecopoetic canon, but as Keller suggests, the way we view the nonhuman world is being more and more revealed as itself an impediment to a viable human/nonhuman relationship. Her suggestion is that the “poetry wars” are being re-enacted in ecopoetics after the

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\(^2\) “The Trouble with Wilderness,” William Cronon’s groundbreaking essay, appeared in his edited volume *Uncommon Ground*. Both the essay and the introduction point out that the meaning of terms like “wilderness” or “nature” have changed dramatically over time, and have little if anything to do with the actual physical nonhuman world. Instead, the terms privilege certain experiences with the nonhuman over others, and all for social reasons, many of which have to do with validating the idea of essentialist identity. “Wilderness” as an idea teaches us to value some parts of the nonhuman world at the expense of others, devalues the daily or near to home as well as other people, and prioritizes certain short recreational experiences over the ways in which we actually live. Cronon’s suggestion, then, is that we abandon the term “wilderness” and instead apply our feelings of protectiveness or wonder, or our willingness to withhold our power to dominate, not to these supposedly wild spaces but to the places and people we encounter daily. In its original publication in *The New York Times*, Cronon’s rejection of “wilderness” was viewed by some as attacking environmentalism from within, sparking significant debate over what we study, in what context, and who should participate in the conversation. Keller’s use of Cronon perhaps subtly implies that ecopoetry also needs such a revolutionary moment.
fact, and that traditional ecocriticism sided with the “cooked” or traditionalist lyric poetic mode, and that we continue to be stuck in that aesthetic choice even though ecocriticism as a body of theory has widened away from being bound totally to biological sciences to include more social and urban theory and literature.

Yet poetry that self-consciously investigates how language shapes our understanding of the world, or experiments with space and place as they are rendered on the page, may valuably point us toward alternative understandings of the environment and our modes of interacting with it…the canon of poetic works considered by ecocritics needs to expand so as to include not only more writing based in environments other than “nature” and “wilderness” but also more linguistically experimental, “postmodern” writing. (Keller 605)

By and large, Keller is correct about the preference of ecocriticism for poetry that is both overtly about a specific subset of the nonhuman world and about the preference for non-experimental poetics. Both are related to the traditional ecocritical desires to make place and encourage activism—more on this later. The same sets of poets turn up over and over again for ecocritical analysis, and many of the most common, such as Gary Snyder, Mary Oliver, or Wendell Berry, fall firmly in this category. Few studies make use of poets whose work is linguistically “difficult” or who participate in the experimental American lineage. This is also true of poets whose subject matter is not “nature” or “wilderness” but other types of environment such as urban or suburban spaces. In response, Keller calls for work that challenges this outdated standard in a number of ways, including poetry “that are not necessarily opposed to modernization and technology; that do not necessarily resist poststructuralist thinking and that invite connection to bodies of theory in literary and cultural studies” and that “seek in
experimental approaches to poetic form and language liberation from the inherited modes of thinking that have brought us to the environmental mess in which we find ourselves” (Keller 611). Keller finishes her article up with a suggested list of poets, all of whose poetics are significantly more representative of the wide breadth of poetic technique available to American writers in the later half of the 20th century. While her list has a decidedly heavy emphasis on toxicity narratives, and I do not think that overt toxicity is a necessary theme to environmental writing even in the present day, her push to expand the ecopoetic canon is both exciting and sorely needed.

As both human and nonhuman become problematically diffuse, interrelated categories, to have productive force ecopoetics too needs to learn to trace the development from natural to postnatural world and from human to posthuman aesthetics. As readers who seek out poetry for its aesthetic and personal pleasures as well as people who need to learn to navigate both the human and the nonhuman worlds, to counterbalance the body of nature/activist poetry, I suggest that ecopoetry do what it has not yet done and make full use of both the strongest, most exciting developments in both ecocritical theory as well as the experimental tradition in contemporary American poetry. The experimental American tradition in particular questions human identity and our linguistic construction practices in a way that remakes the narratives we use to understand the nonhuman world. Because of this, not only is experimental poetry the genre most suited to exploring and achieving ecocritical goals, but ecopoetry and ecopoetics are perfectly poised to become vital teachers in a complex twenty-first century world. As we enter this postnatural world, we will require a postnatural self that can successfully negotiate human-nonhuman relationships in a way that is able to acknowledge and negotiate anthropogenic change to our world.
To this end, I want to suggest an ecopoetic reading of a lineage of poets whose work relies not on traditional conceptions of human and nature, but whose experimental work is open to very different understandings of location and human identity: Charles Olson, James Schuyler, and Lyn Hejinian. While not typically thought of as part of environmental movements or the ecocritical canon, these poets are valuable to ecocritical readers because of the attention paid to the intersection of environment, language, and human. These poets participate in an experimental, postmodern arc, which allows them to increasingly question the ability of poetry to offer mimetic accuracy as well as the effects of the constructions of human and nonhuman that language produces. The universal effect of these writers’ work is an increasing tendency to regard space in their work as well as place, and an accompanying increasing abandonment of essentialist human identity. Because of these writers’ choice to engage space as well as place, the version of human self created in these poems does not become merely a navel-gazing or colonizing monolithic force, as place-based identity can. This spatially-oriented self incorporates, and benefits from, not only postmodern poetics’ skepticism towards consistent narrative and self but also all the traits of space: ambiguity, multiplicity, failure, and limitation. When spatial orientation allows a posthuman to realize the toxicity of the world, the resultant experience has the potential not to “save the Earth,” but to allow humans to become comfortable being uncomfortable in an anthropogenically changed nonhuman world.

**Let’s Start at the Very Beginning: Place and Space**

Perhaps the most immediate barrier to postnatural poetics is the traditional environmental experience, particularly the preference for “place,” a term that is very useful in a traditional humanist worldview but which loses currency in a posthuman, postnatural world. By examining traditional conceptions of place and their limitations and then moving into an examination of
space, ecopoetics gains access to an understanding of environment that is more compatible with a more contemporary sense of what a human is.

Lawrence Buell, in *Writing for an Endangered World*, draws on a variety of critics to define place as space plus meaning (59), and expands that definition to encompass the spectrum from the location where I am at the moment, or “home,” to virtual and imagined places. The key place concept is that the idea of “human meaning” continues throughout. The defining characteristic of place is that it is a location that has been brought into human terms so that we can understand or interact with it. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell cites a variety of definitions of place from the more social “centers of felt value” or “areas in which settings for the constitution of social relations are located and with which people can identify” to definitions that emphasize geography: “Each place is also ‘inseparable from the concrete region in which it is found’” or “defined by physical markers as well as social consensus” (qtd. in Buell, *Future* 63). He points out that we feel attachments to spaces, feel at home in them, and that “Place is associatively thick” (63). We make place because we do not suffer feelings of alienation or hostility there.

An emphasis on the desire not just to reduce the potential alienation of an unknown world, but to actively take value in the nonhuman around us marks J. Scott Bryson’s version of place in *The West Side of Any Mountain*. This text suggests that ecopoetry has two primary goals into which the large body of ecocritical poetic work, both critical and creative, falls, the first of which is “(1) to *create place*, making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us…” (8). Place in this sense is a location that has become a site of aware interaction for humans and the nonhuman world. Bryson follows widely accepted ecocritical practice as he describes placemakers as those who, through descriptive acts, create this site of
aware interaction, allowing us to “inhabit” the world. This is hardly a new idea; as Buell points out, “world history is a history of space becoming place” (Future 63) as we transform a hostile unknown into a place that we are familiar with and feel good in. This process of making place, of creating deliberate associations with the nonhuman world in order to feel good there, was for quite a while a sort of gold standard of ecocritical work. “For contemporary environmental criticism…place often seems to offer the promise of a ‘politics of resistance’ against modernism’s excesses” (65). The idea is that being distracted away from the environment by technology or ideology can be counterbalanced by a set of specific narratives and experiences that encourage connection to a person’s surrounding nonhuman world. Often the goal is to form connections to the nonhuman that are not dependent on exclusively human interests or goals, but rather a mixture of human and nonhuman interests. Particularly in this regard, place can be any number of sizes or varying intensities of attachment to a human, “Ecocriticism, however, has tended to favor literary texts oriented toward comparatively local or regional levels of place-attachment” (68). This is certainly the sense of place driving Bryson’s methodology, which praises ecocritics and poets for “attempting to move their audience out of existence in an abstract postmodernized space, where we are simply visitors in an unknown neighborhood, and into a recognition of our present surroundings as place and thus as home” (Bryson 11). The goal of getting people to look out their front doors with feelings of love is clear.

Place also requires more than transient engagement; place has huge temporal qualities that many place-interested people have emphasized. “Place-attachment has temporal dimensions as well…” says Buell, “it reflects the accrued platial experiences of a lifetime” (Future 73). Past places affect ability to make new locations into place in the future, “So place-sense is a kind of palimpsest of serial place-experiences. Conversely, place itself changes” (73), which means that
to fully understand a place is to understand not just your own platial experiences but the history of a given location regardless of whether or not you were there. What is more, it requires paying attention to several sociological strata of history, as “place must also be thought of more extrinsically, as an artifact socially produced by the channeling effects of social position as well as by canonical mappings of space” (74): a rich woman and a poor man may have very different “places” in the same geographic location. Multiple histories are required for a full sense of place, and many writers are interested in producing just that type of place. This can also have the beneficial effect of solving potential ethnocentrisms or erasures in platial experience (Future 82).

One of the biggest groups of placemakers is the bioregionalists, who “favor an ethic not simply of environmental literacy but also of ‘sustainability’—of more prudent, self-sufficient use of natural resources such that environmental and human quality will be maintained (and ideally improved) with better human/human and human/nonhuman consideration both within the bioregion and beyond” (84-85). By introducing ethics and politics into placemaking, bioregionalism widens the conversation from individual choice to societal policies. Ecocriticism’s author Greg Garrard explains that bioregionalism draws on both a more traditional pastoral or agrarian experience plus a more radical social ecological politics to create a movement interested in the interactions between human societies and landscapes (118). For Garrard, “Bioregionalism is therefore a politics of ‘reinhabitation’ that encourages people to explore more deeply the natural and cultural landscape in which they already live” (118). The benefits of bioregionalism include things like unifying political groups of people despite other social or economic disparities, connecting urban geographies to suburban and rural ones, and demanding pragmatism (118-19). In this way, these placemaking practices can solve the sense
of alienation humans tend to have when confronted with the nonhuman, and also address social problems that arise due to a lack of emplacedness.

Unfortunately, because of the benefits of place, the focus on placemaking has led to a tendency to reject or even revile space as placelessness and thus useless. After all, space is the very nonhuman unknown that place theory insists is alienating and unpleasant. However, this is a limited and limiting understanding of space. While it is true that “space against place connotes geometrical or topographical abstraction” (Buell, Future 63), Buell also points out that “These are not simple antonyms. Place entails spatial location” (63): all place exists inside space. As a result, in literature, Bryson argues place and space are always in play simultaneously, and that the recognition of space and the way in which it resists humans is a necessary counterbalance for placemaking’s inherent anthropocentric tendencies. Bryson describes ecocriticism’s second goal as “(2) to value space, recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable” (8). Because space is something that resists human understanding, it is a constant reminder that even the most well-intentioned construction of place is still fundamentally a project designed to serve human needs. From the perspective of space, placemaking is not automatically constructive but can be destructive. As David Gilcrest suggests in Greening the Lyre, the straightforward environmentalist urge to “speak for” the nonhuman as activist/placemaking poets do is a colonizing move that actually strengthens an anthropocentric point of view in regards to the nonhuman (5). By including awareness of space in writing practices, a writer lessens placemaking’s anthropocentric tendencies and resists colonization. Because of this, Bryson suggests that place and space, that which is comfortable or inhabitable and that which is outside description, should be in constant tension in any fully-developed ecopoetry.
There are other problems with traditional or fully-place-based thinking. For one, traditional forms of emplacement, such as bioregionalism, are becoming less and less viable “when fewer and fewer of the world’s population live out their lives in locations that are not shaped to a great extent by translocal—ultimately global—forces” (Buell, Future 62-63). As more and more people become mobile for reasons ranging from education or employment to war or environmental catastrophe, the ability to live long enough in one place to generate bioregional awareness becomes limited. Equally, even in one place, a globalizing world means that each place maintains less of the cultural idiosyncrasy that placemakers tend to uphold as important components of place. Buell also comments that “Devotees of place-attachment can easily fall into a sentimental environmental determinism” (66) where bioregion becomes ultimate arbiter of social and cultural practice—a system easily exploited. Even simple placemaking without overt ideological problems can result in problems: “taking a good thing too far (place-attachment and stewardship at the local level) manifestly can produce bad results too: maladaptive sedentariness, inordinate hankering to recover the world we have lost, xenophobic stigmatization of outsiders and wanderers” (68). While placemaking may successfully address feelings of alienation or homelessness, it is certainly not a panacea.

Garrard suggests that other problems may arise, particularly in the case of bioregionalism, such as disputes over what constitutes place that are answered only with “the scientifically informed intuition of reinhabitants” (128). He also suggests that such ecologically-minded placemaking is perhaps easy in large countries, but “Bioregions based on, say, the River Jordan watershed or the Congo, would have to incorporate hostile ethnic groups who are deeply rooted in their geographical locations as presently defined” (129). In a gesture echoing Buell above, Garrard also points out that “many of the indigenous societies whose knowledge and
lococentric values bioregionalists admire are already thoroughly deracinated” (129) due to war, voluntary migration, and so on—and that to uphold such cultures as a panacea to environmental problems can approach the idea of the noble savage. These types of problems, many of which have their roots in an overwhelming need for place and a proportionate disdain for or fear of space, can be productively addressed by chasing space as well as place.

**What? Where?: Poststructuralist Language and Postnatural Space**

Bryson’s suggestion that space is unknowable seems defeatist at first blush: how can we describe a thing that is defined as unknowable or unknown? However, it is possible to cultivate spatial awareness without actually transforming spatial locations into place. Several theorists’ work over the last decade builds a path to an ecopoetics where spatial recognition is possible. One of the important shifts is away from a “naturalistic” view of language to an increasingly poststructuralist view; instead of insisting that there is no linguistic gap between humans and the nonhuman world, ecocritics have grown increasingly mindful of the way in which language fails to be mimetic. Each subsequent study emphasizes to a greater degree that what we produce in words is not real contact but linguistic constructions that are not necessarily related to the external nonhuman that lies outside our experience. Rather than being a problem that needs to be solved with aggressive placemaking, theorists in the spatial lineage believe that this provides an opportunity to gain awareness without making aggressive colonizing or claiming moves. The other consistent gesture visible in spatial ecocritical theory has been to explore the ways in which we currently live in what is, in many ways, an unpleasant world. Rather than promising to “save the Earth,” dangling the carrot of an Edenic return in front of its readers, ecocriticism that is
aligned with space theorizes ways to be comfortable being uncomfortable in the world that we actually have and which in all likelihood is now ours forever: the postnatural world.

One of the critics laying ground for the acceptance of poststructuralist language theory into ecopoetic practice is Leonard Scigaj, writer of *Sustainable Poetry*, who uses phenomenology to renegotiate postmodern language criticism in order to reflect awareness of the nonhuman and complex human/nonhuman interactions beyond language. Though he is not yet very far down the road to accepting poststructuralism and he is not specifically invested in a spatial project, Scigaj’s demonstration of the way in which language can refer to what lies outside it is an important step in moving toward spatial awareness. Scigaj rejects poststructuralism’s assertion that language is fully detached from the world, which he sees counterproductive for ecocriticism’s attempt to study the relation between texts and the nonhuman world. Instead, language, despite its mimetic failures, is connected to the physical world via Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological concept of the flesh of the world, “the objective of which is to restore to the referential world its transcendence without postulating either a theological foundationalism or an initial divorce between human subjectivity and the world that humans inhabit” (Scigaj 65).

He argues that social praxis demonstrates language at work in the material world despite its seeming disconnection. To discuss this, he develops a technique called *référence* in deliberate echo of and revision of Derrida’s *différence*. In *référence*, the poet, conscious of the way that language is the result of the flesh of the world viewing itself, uses the way language is limited not in the service of navel-gazing play, but rather to indicate by the moment where it stops what lies beyond—to use the failure of language to refer to what escapes, which for him is the material world beyond humans’ ability to describe it. “If words cannot capture referential reality in any essentialistic way, what an ecopoet can do is direct our gaze beyond the printed page toward
firsthand experiences that approximate the poet’s intense involvement in the authentic experience that lies behind his originary language” (Scigaj 41). In other words, because it is connected to the world in some ways even if direct mimesis fails, ecopoetry can generate in us an experience with the nonhuman that lies outside language’s authoritative colonizing force.

However, Scigaj’s overall project is (perhaps deliberately) limited in scope by an older theoretical dedication to the trope of “nature” and traditional activism:

Once completed, an ecopoem becomes a tool for altering the reader’s perceptions from the anthropocentric to the biocentric, and many ecopoems model biocentric behavior. Ecopoems help us to live our lives by encouraging us to understand, respect, and cooperate with the laws of nature that sustain us. Today we very much need sustainable poetry. (81)

For Scigaj, poetry only has ecocritical resonances insofar as it takes “nature” as its subject matter and insofar as it has an activist edge that works to connect its readers to that nature in the hopes of rendering them environmental activists. An academic activist himself, Scigaj’s linguistic/theoretical concerns almost seem to take a backseat to his larger concerns about damaged environments and human responsibility to/for the material world. Despite these limitations, though, the way in which Scigaj both acknowledges even a small gap between language and world as well as the way he encourages writers to be concerned with a nonhuman that exists outside language is a useful first stage on the path towards spatial awareness as well as a move toward recognizing posthuman identity.

Building on Scigaj is David Gilcrest’s concept of “skeptical” poetry in Greening the Lyre. In this text, Gilcrest will argue against what he calls “ecological” poetry and for a “skeptical” poetics of restraint and absence that resists linguistically colonizing the nonhuman
and instead forms a silent but mutually-non-destructive relationship with the nonhuman.

Gilcrest’s dispute with most of what we think of as environmental poetry, or what he terms “ecological poetry,” is that it is based on what he calls a “scientific” and “normative ecology” that implies an ethic problematically based on Leopold’s land ethic and in which we have a near-religious faith (17). The problem with this is that it produces a situation in which humans feel far too in control of the situation the poem describes:

Given the apparent urgency of environmental crisis, it is reasonable to ask whether we will be better off with a poetry that helps us understand our need for an explanation of our origins instead of a poetry that explains our origins in such a way that we can approach the rat [a stand-in for the nonhuman] with self-confidence. With enough faith in ecology, we might easily settle for the latter...

(36)

Gilcrest’s distinction is that it is more desirable to figure out why we need to have control than to have control (which we have too much of already). As a result, our need is not for placemaking poetry, but poetry that makes us uneasy about our own constructions of ourselves in relationship to the nonhuman.

Perhaps responding to studies such as Bernard Quetchenbach’s celebration of contemporary activist or placemaking poets in Back From the Far Field, Gilcrest shows that speaking for the nonhuman in the way ecological poetry does, either straightforwardly or despite expressed concerns about mimetic legitimacy, suggests implicitly that ecological poetry has the correct answers for explaining human experience and dictating correct human action in regards to the nonhuman, which Gilcrest believes is a way of colonizing the nonhuman linguistically.
My own view is that the move to recognize the nonhuman speaking subject, though motivated by admirable ethical concerns, is inevitably nagged by epistemological difficulties, which ultimately suggests that an ecocentric ethic is poorly served by such a strategy. At issue is the degree to which humans may be said to comprehend the interests of nonhuman entities as well as the ability of humans to ‘represent’ such interests faithfully. (41)

As a result, Gilcrest will call for a different kind of poetry that both avoids speaking for the nonhuman and maintains a productive skepticism both of human desires and abilities in writing as well as language’s mimetic ability.

Asserting that we need to emphasize the difference between words and the material world in order to avoid forgetting the way that language itself shapes our interactions with the nonhuman, Gilcrest points out that any big truth-claim, especially one that claims itself as the only truth, will eventually break down under its own inability to explain, and that most environmental poetry, committed to activist ethics, does this. Gilcrest finds Scigaj’s concept of référenc useful despite the above objections and Scigaj’s environmental activist edge, and suggests that référence can be a tool in writing the kind of poetry that Gilcrest champions: “The processes circumscribed by référence allow for both the nondualistic experience of environmental interconnectedness and reciprocity and its expression within the comprehensive confines of language” (Gilcrest 136). Gilcrest champions a kind of poetry that, instead of naively trying for mimesis, is skeptical of itself and aware of its own limitations.

By emphasizing the essential distinction between things and our words for things, a skeptical hermeneutic acknowledges the ontological autonomy of the nonhuman. A skeptical hermeneutic thus encourages, to whatever extent
possible, an awareness of nonhuman entities unmediated by linguistic structure. I would also argue that an environmental poetics informed by a skeptical hermeneutics reinforces ecocentric values by recognizing that nonhuman entities do not exist merely in their relation to human interpretive structures or as material for poetic representation. (133-34)

This poetics gives us a type of writing that self-consciously does as good a job as language can at discussing the nonhuman and then uses its awareness of its own limitation as a way to point to what lies just beyond its boundary. While Gilcrest does not specifically use the terminology, it seems that the thing that skeptical poetry is pointing at is space. Skeptical poetry’s tools, restraint and silence, are designed to find and draw our attention to the spatial “event horizon” beyond which language fails. Rather than bringing space into a human framework in order to render it place, this poetic stance emphasizes the value in space’s existence as itself, independent of us. It encourages us to form a new and mutually-non-destructive relationship with the nonhuman, invigorating the concept of space without reverting to colonization.

Gilcrest’s study finishes with a common ecocritical fear: “While I have supreme faith in the ability of poets to generate the figures that might shape a better world, I am far less sanguine concerning poetry’s ostensible power to move through the world with enough strength and grace to change minds and hearts” (147). Even more of a potential stumbling block than poetry’s “elite” status (say nothing of ecopoetics) is that people have to actively choose to care about these texts and issues. Few of these studies have been able to suggest that anything other than good will or personal interest can motivate people to be actively interested in their relationship to or constructions of the nonhuman. How, then, to get people interested in these conceptions of space?
One of the significant hurdles involved in selling space is the sense that spatial awareness can be uncomfortable, and most people are ill-equipped to experience the discomfort of the world. Creating a human who can be comfortable in an uncomfortable world involves changing both the framework for experiences of the world as well as changing the human having the experiences, and several theorists have laid groundwork in these areas. The first, who in particular has a useful answer to Gilcrest’s despair over getting an audience for ecopoetics, is Lee Rozelle. Rozelle renarrativizes the sublime encounter so that an encounter with a postnatural world results in posthuman, toxic identity. One of the dominant characteristics of the postnatural world is toxicity: there is no longer a nonhuman that is free from human influence. Environmental degradation means that from the 19th century onward, traditional conceptions of “nature” have been failing. For Rozelle, this can be productive: since the human relationship with the nonhuman has been and is increasingly mediated, we can use that mediation to reorient the human and create awareness of ecological crisis. Rozelle wants to do this by describing the ways in which the postnatural world still offers us a sublime encounter, but now, sublimity is bound by toxicity and degradation. Rozelle’s sublime model begins with the familiar trajectory of 1) encounter with a thing larger than the viewer, 2) trauma to self caused by disparity between self and the larger thing, and finally 3) joy and self-enlargement as the tension between self and thing is resolved by a variety of abstractions or ideologies. However, the introduction of toxicity complicates the model significantly, with the end result not as a human once more complete and self-contained, but rather resulting in a less-stable division that Rozelle calls a “second toxic self”:

the viewing subject experiences an ecosublime strength, violence, and terror in the realizations that an infinitely complex natural ecology has been fragmented by
human intervention, that humankind may not know how to reconfigure the natural machine as it dies, and that there may be no real way to sustain human life on the planet after the inconceivably complex system becomes irreparably disassembled. Images of human overpopulation, species extinction, decentralization, and ozone layer depletion challenge Kantian reason and propel the imagination to grapple with harsh realities; this cognitive negotiation sparks a sublime jolt and subsequent awareness. (7-8)

The awareness in question, for Rozelle, is that the viewer now sees him or herself as deeply implicated in both the current state of the nonhuman world and also sees his or her dependence on that damaged nonhuman. As identity begins to loosen, the viewer is forced to participate not in the joy of a managed sublime, but in what he calls “ecocidal imagination” (8), where s/he sees him/herself both as murderer and suicide, permanently stuck with awareness of this toxic self. While this ecosublime encounter does allow the viewer an eventual semi-safe place in the form of ecological thinking and seeing him/herself as part of a wide-flung ecological network, Rozelle points out that the problem of global environmental degradation is impossible for one person to completely embed him/herself into, or even cognitively grasp, and so such thinking will never allow a full release from the traumatic stage of the ecosublime. Instead, the ecosublime moment is one that is marked by a long-term, if not permanent, version of the sublime trauma, forcing the viewer away from traditional humanism and into constant awareness of his or her posthuman state.

Rozelle’s goal here is overtly political/activist; the benefit of the ecosublime for Rozelle is that awareness, once sparked, seems to be long-term and difficult to avoid; we become literally trapped in an ecosublime world.
We must react to the might and speed of our postnatural condition in an increasingly vertiginous cultural context where the chance for mass acceptance of environmental responsibility seems an unlikelihood. But as many of the writers, strategists, and philosophers in this book have established, an environmental awakening of ecosublime proportions can prove to be a catalyst for social and environmental reform….An awesome and terrifying jolt to the heart and soul has historically overwhelmed even the most rigid and dazed Western mind to awareness and action. (112)

In short, it seems that part of Rozelle’s goal here is that the ecosublime forces posthumans who are finding themselves having to deal with personal toxicity issues to confront the postnatural world they have themselves created. Desire to deal with the problem is irrelevant; once overwhelmed, the desire to not drown under the weight of it forces response.

The notion of the ecosublime’s permanent trauma state has a great deal of use, particularly in explaining posthuman anxieties in regard to the nonhuman and in revamping the seductive but increasingly problematic sublime concept. Though Rozelle does not pay nearly enough attention to the way language works, except to deny the absolute constructedness of the nonhuman through his own empirical experience, his extended trauma stage in which both human and nonhuman resist linguistic containment is particularly useful for spatial ecopoetics. The state of heightened awareness and uncertainty about the nonhuman that then forces similar awareness and uncertainty toward the human in question produces an interaction that seems remarkably similar to the demands of Gilcrest’s skeptical poetics. While the ecosublime for Rozelle hangs on the environmental activist narrative of degradation, I believe that the concept is even more robust than Rozelle himself accounts for. For example, I believe that even without an
overt toxicity/activist narrative, the problem of the gap between humans/language and the unconstruc
ted nonhuman can force a reader to see problems and complexities inherent in a postnatural world and experience a similar state of heightened awareness and anxiety. This would make the ecosublime a wider category and even more available for skeptical or spatially-invested poetics.

Both the move toward increasing acceptance of poststructuralist language theory and the desire to restructure human identity come together through Timothy Morton, whose polemic *Ecology Without Nature* is dedicated to figuring out the posthuman in the postnatural world. Morton’s work, then, resonates with investment in space rather than attachment to place. Unlike some ecocritics who go to great lengths to avoid thinking about language, Morton’s linguistic analysis is always present in his “ecocritique.” In fact, for Morton, language often is the most visible indicator of an underlying ideology. For example, he points out that “The environment was born at exactly the moment when it became a problem” (141), or the moment when we could see it as a separate thing that was doing something contrary and name it as such. He continues to say that “The very word *environmentalism* is evidence of wishful thinking….In a society that fully acknowledged that we were always already involved in our world, there would be no need to point it out” (141). While other theorists take this to mean that we should thus somehow try to collapse this divide between the human and the nonhuman, Morton says “Ecology wants to go from dualism to monism, but not so fast! Rather than seeking some false oneness, acknowledging the gap is a paradoxical way of having greater fidelity to things” (142). Rather than attempt to mash together the paradoxes inherent in human identity in relation to the nonhuman world, Morton’s analysis demonstrates the ways in which we constantly linguistically attempt to close the gap, often without knowing it, via “ecomimesis” and “ambient poetics.” He
goes on to discuss the ways in which this is counterproductive for humans seeking to find a viable relationship with the nonhuman, suggesting instead a version of ecocritical response that lives with and uses the unbridgeable distance between human and nonhuman to productively dismantle our ideological forms of environment, particularly “nature.” The result is an aesthetic and an ethic that Morton calls “dark ecology,” which allows us to accept the role we play in creating a toxic world, to become comfortable being uncomfortable.

Morton’s assessment of most environmental writing is that it participates in what he calls “ecomimesis,” or the desire to somehow capture and represent or recreate the actual world in a specific, participatory way so as to showcase the environment. This is difficult as it does not jive well with how humans perceive the world. As I look at the world, most of the world is “background” or “outside” my attention: things I am not aware of. Meanwhile, the things I pay attention to are “foreground” or “inside.” For Morton, there is no middle ground between the things I see and the things I do not. However, the middle ground is what ecomimesis tries to create by writing environment, by suggesting that I have access to something other than foregrounded specific things and unperceived background. In this type of narrative, we get vivid descriptions of locations with the suggestion that if we describe them enough, we might be able to recreate the experience of being in an environment. Ecomimetic literature is not content to tell me “You are standing next to a bush and a trash can.” Instead it tries to give a sense of being in nature somehow, to convey “nature” as a larger thing than any of the objects I happen to be near. “Nature” becomes some sort of medium in which everything floats like noodles in soup. The ecomimetic goal is that if we can get a sense of “nature,” then we’ll tell ourselves our own stories about trees/trashcans, ones with environmentalist activist goals:
Ecological writing wants to undo habitual distinctions between nature and ourselves. It is supposed not just to describe, but also to provide a working model for a dissolving of the difference between subject and object, a dualism seen as the fundamental philosophical reason for human beings’ destruction of the environment. If we could not merely figure out but actually experience the fact that we were embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it.

(64)

So this is the goal of most ecopoetics: to recreate in readers a sense of being embedded in nature, to first create nature and then make nature into place, so that readers of nature texts will be drawn to environmentalist behavior. He says that the fantasy of ecomimetic writing is that ecological awareness could just happen to us because of our embeddedness, and that experimental art and conservative ecocriticism both suffer from this. “Both crave an automated form of ecological enjoyment. This automation is called ‘nature’” (183). Certainly it would be easier for both activists and humans in general if “nature” could mystically change our minds for us and create protective patterns of behavior in us.

But the problem with this is that the idea cannot actually be enacted. “Nature,” whatever it might be, surely is not foreground: when you try to foreground “nature” by describing it, then you’re left with trees and trashcans again as specific objects that you are examining, and not “nature” at all. So to convey this sense of background without making it into foreground, ecomimesis uses what Morton calls “ambient poetics” to suggest that there’s something between the back/foreground that is neither wholly seen nor wholly ignored. Morton’s analysis includes a detailed explanation of the qualities of ambient poetics and the way that writers, musicians, and other creators use that poetics in order to suggest this state. But this ambience is fundamentally
nonviable. Ambience breaks down under its own writer’s weight; ecomimetic texts are fundamentally a reflection of the human mind, and so instead of watching “nature,” we are watching a human think about the world, not the world itself. “In-between” things like nature are fundamentally an ideological fantasy. Morton’s goal is to make his readers realize that there is no in-between. There are trees and trashcans in the “background,” and me and my experience of trees and trashcans in my “foreground.” That’s it. There is no nature, there is no ambience: it is wrong to claim that there is something more real beyond inside and outside, whether that thing is a world of (sacred) nature (traditional ecological language) or machines (Deleuze and Guattari world). Yet it is equally wrong to say that there is nothing, to ‘believe in nothing,’ as it were, and to say that he or she who has the best argument is the right one—pure nihilism. There is not even nothing beyond inside and outside. Getting used to that could take a lifetime, or more.

(78)

This is the root of Morton’s postnatural idea-set: there is no metaphysics; only regular physics. The world is comprised only of the parts that I am currently paying attention to and the parts that I am not paying attention to. To suggest some mystical or invisible connection between these things is to create false ideology that will actively prevent us from understanding the nonhuman world around us.

Morton’s entire analysis, despite not using the vocabulary, is particularly relevant for thinking about constructions of location. Morton’s rejection of artificial constructs like “nature” and his emphasis on the way in which said constructs cannot actually give us an experience of the outside/background reminds me significantly of ecopoetic calls for acknowledgment of space. Morton’s suggestion about how humans should approach the nonhuman world that
surrounds us also seems useful for people interested in space, as Morton’s emphasis is on the degree to which background is unknowable: “The environment is that which cannot be indicated directly. We could name it apophatically. It is not-in-the-foreground. It is the background, caught in a relationship with the foreground. As soon as we concentrate on it, it turns into the foreground” (175). This makes any discussion of environment, or indeed of location, troubling. How do I think of environment when to think of it directly renders it non-environment? How do I think of space if to do so is to render it place? As Morton suggests, by defining through what it is not? By suggesting the rough edges of a blank space and avoiding the center, like explorers’ maps of continent outlines? Morton suggests a shift in method of thinking: “environment is theory—theory not as an answer to a question or as instruction manual (what is the theory behind that dishwasher?) but as question, and question mark, as in question, questioning-ness” (175).

Environment is not a fixed thing, but a theoretical space of maybe, a thing marked by its ineffability. No matter how much we might want to have access, Morton seems to argue that the environment as environment can only ever exist as space, and to try to do otherwise is to colonize it as human. To shift our thinking from “What is this specific thing” to “This is an ongoing process of questioning” is to change our relationship to the unknowable nonhuman in such a way that we do not need to rush in and make place, do not need to ease our anxieties with the idea that every object “out there” is wrapped in knowable nature.

The alternative to ecomimesis’ ambient poetics is, for Morton, critical choice and dark ecology.

Ecology without nature must come up with something quite different. Its ethics look more like perversion—or like acknowledging the perverse quality of choice in itself—the shutting down of possibilities, the acceptance of death. It is what
Walden calls ‘liv[ing] deliberately’—without having to retreat to the woods to do so. This is critical choice. Consumerist ideological choice preserves the idea that we still have a choice. Critical choice shuts down the possibility of choosing again. (183)

Consumer ideological choice is designed in such a way that we choose from a field of options that then become identity or aesthetics, but that do not preclude making other choices either simultaneously or tomorrow. This form of choice suggests we may choose to “believe” in ideologies like climate science or denialism, and buy electric cars or reusable shopping bags accordingly, becoming “an environmentalist,” but tomorrow I could trade my Leaf in for a Hummer, should I choose a different ideology. Alternatively, critical choice forces us to act as though every choice we made were genuinely critical (fatal). Almost seeming to echo Pascal’s wager, Morton’s critical choice forces us to act as if the nonhuman world is our direct responsibility and our personal choices are the key ones: the consequences for making the incorrect choice are too disastrous to ignore.

Since critical choice focuses on ideology, the critical choice Morton encourages us to make is to reject “nature” and stop acting as if it were a buffer between us and the physical nonhuman. Instead, Morton suggests we should accept our own role in the current state of the nonhuman world: “The ecological thought, the thinking of interconnectedness, has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or a sadistic-sentimental Bambification of sentient beings, but in a ‘goth’ assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world: dark ecology” (185). Morton’s dark ecology is an acceptance of anthropogenic environmental degradation that does not allow for an escape into “nature,” but requires its adherents to stay focused on the postnatural world of foreground and background:
“We start by thinking that we can ‘save’ something called ‘the world’ ‘over there,’ but end up realizing that we are ourselves implicated. This is the solution to beautiful soul syndrome: reframing our field of activity as one for which we ourselves are formally responsible, even guilty…Dark ecology undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature” (187). This is a way of escaping what is ultimately the paralyzing, agency-denying idea of “nature” or “place” with critical choice, which produces active agency to deal with real conditions rather than relying on ideologically-shaky ground or allowing people to lock themselves into a traditional humanist space.

So while we campaign to make our world ‘cleaner’ and less toxic, less harmful to sentient beings, our philosophical adventure should in some ways be quite the reverse. We should be finding ways to stick around with the sticky mess that we’re in and that we are, making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness, practicing ‘hauntology’ (Derrida’s phrase) rather than ontology. So out with the black clothes, eyeliner, and white makeup, on with the spangly music: dark ecology. (188)

Instead of saving “nature,” Morton asks us to instead examine our foreground and our actions within that foreground. Rather than trying to make a “place” out of “nature,” Morton’s ecocritique asks us to work with the real consequences of degraded foreground, to better understand our own posthuman selves as creatures whose interdependent relationship with the postnatural world on the whole results in toxicity and death. The result of this is not just an aesthetic cult of death, but instead a productive agency: “ecological criticism must politicize the aesthetic. We choose this poisoned ground. We will be equal to this senseless actuality” (205).

The idea of nature and our abstraction from it is a hugely useful political tool that can be used to
do almost anything; because of its very middle ground quality, it becomes an astonishing black box where any input can result in almost any output. To politicize a different aesthetic, a postnatural, posthuman, dark ecological aesthetic, will allow us to align ourselves with an uncomfortable, unknowable world.

**Show Me How You Do That Trick: From Realist Nature to Spatial Ecopoetics**

If the canon of traditional environmental activist poetry has only limited ability to foster a sense of a posthuman, postnatural world, what kind of poetry should we be reading? If it exists, is it a recent development, or is there a historical body of work to support a spatially-dependent understanding of the world? Since so much of the debate centers around the ability of language to offer accurate mimesis, an interesting place to start is with Marjorie Perloff’s *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. While not ecocriticism and certainly motivated far more by language studies than an attempt to mediate the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, Perloff’s study offers insight which for an ecocritical reader seem to have immediate currency for examining platial versus spatial poetics. For Perloff, too little attention has been paid to the stylistic differences in what might be thought of as American experimental poetry, all of which tends to get folded into the famous “raw” (as opposed to “cooked”) category. Perloff sees American experimental poetry as belonging to two separate branches: symbolist poetry and indeterminate poetry. The symbolist lineage goes from Baudrillard and Mallarmé to Yeats, Auden, Eliot; through Stevens, Frost, and Crane; and then to Lowell and Berryman. She looks at landscapes in Eliot, Auden, and Stevens, and demonstrates how their landscapes are really just symbolic inner reflections of the poet’s own life. She points out that these landscapes are nothing more than Eliot’s objective correlative: a set of elements designed to generate a certain
emotional or internal human state. Like Morton’s assertion that trying to bring the background into the foreground only results in a transcript of the writer’s own thoughts, and not actually any essential mimesis, these writers’ attempts to describe the world are actually attempts to describe a human being, and thus, for all their modernist qualities, reify a traditional humanism that is generally either detached from the nonhuman or at best a placemaking activity. 

The alternative to the symbolist lineage is an “anti-Symbolist” mode of indeterminacy, undecidability, and free play, which goes from Rimbaud in the French tradition to Stein, Pound, Williams, and eventually people like Ashbery and Beckett. The fundamental character of this writing is such that the “symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not” (Perloff 18): in other words, things that resist representation, that try to detach words from their “actual” meaning and focus on other things: sonic qualities, for example, or maybe what Silliman would call “polyreferential” quality of words. Interestingly, Perloff describes this poetry as the opposite of mimesis, “meontic”: the imitation of what is not there, a process that seems to me to have interesting resonances with Gilcrest’s skeptical poetry’s definition of space as the thing that should not/cannot be described as well as Morton’s assertion that the environment exists as a question in the sense of always being in question.

Perloff’s study offers ecopoetics a number of things: it demonstrates that concerns about human representation of and interaction with the nonhuman do not necessarily need to be driven

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3 Note that this lineage is certainly alive today, both in poetry itself and in accompanying poetics. As I will mention in greater detail in later chapters, the current vogue for concepts like landscape and pastoral has produced several studies which, in what seems almost like Vavilovan mimicry, seem to be ecocritical studies but lack either the goals or methodologies of ecocriticism, employing instead only surface terminology to get at their real interests: poets’ inner lives or writing processes. Two such examples are Jed Rasula’s This Compost and Timothy Gray’s Urban Pastoral, focusing on Charles Olson and the New York School respectively.
by environmentalist activist politics or the concept of “nature” in order to be valuable in terms of ecocritical insight. It also suggests that exploration of experimental poetics from even thirty years ago (Perloff’s study was done in 1981) is startlingly congruent with contemporary ecocritical theory (the earliest ecocritical study I reference here is Scigaj in 1999). To that end, I want to trace a similar alternate lineage in American poetics in order to learn what it has to offer ecopoetics and ecocriticism as a whole. It seems to me that there is a field that is not yet productively tapped, and that ecocritics, environmental activists, poets, and literary scholars, all of whom will shortly need to face Morton’s critical choices, will find a much wider range of agency if this spatially-available body of work is explored for its ecocritical resonances.

For the purposes of this study, I want to begin this lineage at a nexus point where postmodern, posthuman, and postnatural begin to sync up in American poetry. In general, the end of modernism coincides with World War II in America. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* begins volume two, the “contemporary” volume, with Charles Olson in 1946; its introduction suggests that this new postmodern body of work begins with “the generation of poets who published their first books largely after World War II….Even though World War II did not completely divide the poetry written before it from that written after, it is a useful historical marker for the period’s beginnings” (Ramazani xliii). Additionally, Charles Olson is often given credit for being the person to coin the term “postmodern,” though what he meant by it is significantly different than the general-purpose definition it is usually given today⁴.

The concept of when “postnatural” begins is equally fuzzy. Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature*, suggests that the term “nature” underwent a profound shift due to the industrial

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⁴ For more on this, see the introduction to Ch. 2.
revolution; prior to this, the dominant conception of nature was as an organic being which we tended to associate with women’s bodies. After this, the dominant idea with which we understood nature became the machine, making “nature” less “natural” and more mechanical. Another strong argument, however, can be made for a slightly later date: the beginning of environmental awareness (that is, in the sense of awareness of environment as site of toxicity, destructive exploitation, or other types of degradation and with a goal of creating political action). One of the earliest markers of this change in thought (as opposed to a specific local environmental justice issue) is the publication of “The Land Ethic” section of Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac And Sketches Here and There* in 1949, where Leopold calls for a “land ethic” which “reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity” (221). This awareness of the nonhuman world as a site of difficulty and damage suggests a good place for the beginning of postnatural awareness.

The technique of finding a significant ideological shift seems useful also in defining “posthuman.” Most definitions place this within the 20th century, or perhaps in the Western European Industrial Revolution at earliest, when we became aware of the way technology is fundamentally shifting what it means to be human, as opposed to technology as changing the world around the consistent human. Brian Cooney, in *Posthumanity: Thinking Philosophically About the Future* offers the 20th century as the time when philosophy’s traditional categories of knowledge really began to shift dramatically in response to technological developments, concluding that “What makes the twenty-first century so special is the rate at which a rapidly progressing technology is yielding products that are destabilizing many categories at once” (xii).
He also locates this shift in several vocabulary terms, such as the creation of “cyborg” in 1960 or the similar use of the word “bionic,” each of which implies the combination of technology and biological organism (Cooney xxiv). The gesture I think Cooney seems to be making is that, like the postnatural shift, the hallmark of the posthuman is that it is awareness that it is no longer the same as it once was. If a thing can be named, it exists; posthumanity’s most useful starting point, then, seems to be the moment when humans are aware of themselves as both alterers and altered, interacting with and mediating themselves and their environments in deliberate ways. To me, the nexus of these concepts then seems to be the middle of the 20th century. In this moment, the environment has become a viable thing in itself, indeterminate poetics has taken modernism’s often-oppositional understanding of an increasingly-technologized world and instead chosen a more complex interaction, and humans have begun to realize the ways in which traditional humanism is no longer able to account for the human experience.

The poets I wish to trace in this study, then, are ones whose work, while not necessarily purposely or overtly a part of this shift to a posthuman, postnatural world, are part of the lineage that will establish the poetic patterns and concerns that allow me, in 2013, to envision and practice spatial ecopoetics. They fall within the American “raw” tradition or spring from Perloff’s poetics of indeterminacy lineage. They situate themselves in urban or suburban landscapes as well as “natural” ones and understand language as a shifting, fallible thing marked by incompleteness, brokenness, ambiguity, and uncertain identities. Unpacking this lineage will allow us to find the poetic history of this idea set and will allow us to understand a wider body of poetic work as ecocritically productive. This shift will also help shift environmental thought and practice to include ways of understanding and making choices congruent with contemporary ecocritical theory as well. My pragmatic hope is that tracing this poetic lineage in terms of
spatial ecopoetics will demonstrate for posthumans a way of achieving greater traction in making
Morton’s critical choices about the postnatural world we live in and our own behavior and
allegiances.

The first poet I wish to re-examine in terms of this new spatial ecopoetics is Charles
Olson, whose lasting contribution to spatial ecopoetics is a postmodernist view of the world.
Olson, who “believed that his age took its fundamental character from being posthumanist,
posthistoric, and postmodern” is a writer whose work seeks to redefine “human” in light of both
time and location (Ramazani 2: 2). Olson is certainly not deliberately an environmentalist writer,
and he did not have access to ecopoetic vocabulary. But Olson’s poetry is capable of being
reread in a way congruent with current ecocritical theory in general and spatial concerns in
specific. While the majority of Olson scholarship argues that Olson is a placemaker who allows
humans to rehabit a postmodern world, I think this is a reading that is reliant on older
ecocritical theory and is not responsive enough to the cleverness of Olson’s language. In fact, to
me Olson’s work reads as highly skeptical of language’s ability to offer simple mimesis.
Instead, Olson’s poetry deliberately courts the moments in which poetic language breaks or fails,
highlighting those fractures as opportunities to explore the way inherited conceptions of the
world are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of either a changing nonhuman world or a
humanity that is struggling to find a viable way to relate to it. Instead of relying on mimetic
language to collapse the gap between human and nonhuman, Olson’s poetry uses myth and
history to make deliberate constructions of the world and to highlight the artifice of human
construction practices. The benefit of being very aware of how we process the world and make it
our own is that it is another way of studying ourselves and gaining identity. For ecocritics
interested in space, Olson’s choice to reject mimesis and embrace constructs is a preliminary step
toward spatial ecopoetics as it is a way of avoiding false ecomimesis and its subsequent platial
colonization of the nonhuman world.

Building on Charles Olson’s rejection of mimesis in favor of embracing human
constructs is James Schuyler, whose view of the world is deeply postnatural. Schuyler is often
lauded or set apart as the “nature” New York School writer, and when he is read in terms of his
interest in the nonhuman world, he tends to be read as a pastoral poet who creates a “natural”
space in the city, or who brings city concerns and aesthetics to the countryside. However, I think
this results in too much attention to the physical objects that populate his poems and not enough
attention to his poetic process or language, both of which are doing markedly different things
than pastoral literature generally attempts. Schuyler’s poetry has several characteristics that
make it ideal for spatial review. One of the most important of these is that Schuyler’s poetry is
marked by a consistent acceptance of the way things are. While this could, in other hands, lead
to naïve mimesis, what Schuyler accepts is largely a process rather than a specific object, and is
more about absence or incompleteness than success and presence. Deeply aware of language’s
failure to offer mimesis and human perception’s inaccuracy, what Schuyler accepts is the
inherent failure, limitation, and incompleteness in language and in perception. Instead of being
flaws that then need to be remade through heroic verse, as in Olson’s work, Schuyler instead
celebrates these incapacities with a light touch that makes other poetry seem heavily “intended”
or overworked.

This deeply colors the way he presents location in his work. While Schuyler himself
would not use the term, Schuyler’s celebration of limitation means that the “natural” world he
shows us is actually a skillful avoidance of ecomimesis. Instead his poems become a constantly
shifting look at foreground, and a look that acknowledges that even the foreground is perhaps not
so available to us as we might think. In short, Schuyler not only recognizes the gap between the human and the nonhuman, but celebrates this gap as a way to gain greater understanding of oneself and greater fidelity to the nonhuman that exists beyond our experiences. By incorporating failure, ending, limitation, and by maintaining a steadfast refusal to use “poetic license” to make experience pat or more desirable, Schuyler’s work teaches us to be comfortable with ambiguous thoughts and experiences that generally make us uneasy and which prefigure a worldview necessary to making Morton’s critical choices. Equally, Schuyler’s poetic techniques establish a valuable art methodology that is an important experimental, technical step toward spatial ecopoetry. Schuyler’s precarious toehold on the world is one in which constant acknowledgement of the inability of language to represent the world means that we approach space, are stopped, and back away. Rather than alarming or scaring us, Schuyler’s constant acceptance teaches us to prefer this vivid, viable failure to false claims of accuracy. We learn to the degree to which the world is postnatural, and begin to prefer our diffuse, problematic relationship with unreachable space to a clear, claimed place.

The final poet I wish to consider in terms of spatial ecopoetics is Lyn Hejinian. Building on Olson’s postmodernism and Schuyler’s postnaturalism, Hejinian challenges language’s ability to represent not just the world but humanity as well, calling all constructs created by language’s process into question. The result is a radically reconstructed posthuman identity not just for Hejinian’s speakers but for her readers as well. This dramatic destabilizing effect puts readers in a state of constant questioningness, opening up the possibility for Timothy Morton’s dark ecology. Hejinian’s prose-poem My Life, seemingly an autobiography, is instead a playful exploration of “strangeness” in which identity becomes unstable, a Frankenstein’s creature-like collage. Meanwhile, the world becomes a sequence of out-of-context foregrounds. Narrative
and linguistic conventions are broken and readers’ expectations of genre are thwarted. The effect is that the human self becomes strange in a strange world: nonidentity meets space. However, despite the vastly estranging effects of the text, the title is not a lie; a reader can see a life occurring despite the text’s fragmenting effects. In this way, *My Life* teaches readers a way to explore the world and language without essential identity or place. A later Hejinian text, *The Cell*, uses more techniques of poetry and becomes even more opaque in its exploration of self and world. If *My Life* makes the speaker strange to the readers, *The Cell* makes readers strange to themselves, leaving them in an uncomfortable nonidentity. It is through the ecosublime trauma of nonidentity in space that readers are able to learn to embrace discomfort, to “hug the monster.” This is the critical step that opens the way for Hejinian’s posthumans to fully embrace dark ecology and to reject ecomimetic “nature” writing. As our own sense of identity loosens, the investment we have in fixed identity disappears, and we are able to mind the linguistic gap between human and nonhuman and maintain a greater solidarity with unknowable space.

**Whistling In the Graveyard: The Spatial Ecopoetic Lineage**

“I have had to learn the simplest things / last. Which made for difficulties,” says “Maximus, to Himself” (Ramazani 2, 9). “The sea was not, finally, my trade. / But even my trade, at it, I stood estranged / from that which was most familiar” (lines 1-2, 5-7). Here Olson, via Maximus⁵, is echoing Ishmael’s relationship to the sea in *Moby-Dick*, itself a desperate gesture that is the only alternative to suicide⁶. Ishmael’s story starts only after a chapter of

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⁵ Between his two years of teaching first-year writing at Clark University and his graduate work at Harvard, Olson shipped out for a three-week stint as a deck hand on a swordfishing trip, deliberately looking for an Ishmaelian experience (Maud 40).

⁶ “Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account
“Etymology” and “Extracts” that demonstrate the linguistic gap between the human and the nonhuman world by showing how none of the things humans have said about whales, including the word whale, are actually capable of recreating the whale. A confused reader thus meets a depressed man in search of a new way to live in the world, a new way to describe it to himself. Much of the work of Moby-Dick is to explore the human/nonhuman relationship. A spatially-attentive reader might consider that the person who is able to recognize the degree to which the nonhuman world is unknowable is the one who survives the voyage, whereas those who believe in the mimetic truth of their own descriptions (or are unable to resist others’, as in the case of poor Starbuck) are destroyed as their constructs fail to account for material reality. Any wonder, then, that Charles Olson, whose creative project would eventually attempt to revise the language and method we use to understand the nonhuman away from direct mimesis, should be so interested in Melville in general and the Ishmael figure in particular? And that his particular interest should be Melville’s experimental language and unusual conceptions of the nonhuman world? Or that Maximus should so closely echo Ishmael’s own concerns about how the “real trade” of both Maximus and Ishmael, or Olson and Melville, which is to create narrative that allows other people to engage with the world, is a process torn between heroic myth and mimetic failure/alienation? Is it any wonder that these voices prefer, feel safer in, experimental language and liminal space, where the simplest lessons may be learned at last?

it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me” (Melville 3).

7 This idea is, of course present in Olson’s Call Me Ishmael, his not-quite-a-dissertation written while at Harvard: “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy” (qtd in Ziegler 55). This view of the human/nonhuman relationship as alienating and yet mutually demanding that Olson sees in play in Melville will also find its full expression in The Maximus Poems.
Particularly for Americans, whose general love of essentialist identity and desire for an Edenic return to a pristine world is so strong, reconfiguring our worldviews to postnaturalism and posthumanism is a difficult lesson to learn, and so we find ourselves in a state of significant difficulty. However, as the writers of this chapter point out, this is not something that is new: there is a huge literary lineage already in place to help us learn how to be posthumans in a postnatural world. We do not need to rely on “save the Earth” narratives to help us whistle past this graveyard. Instead, this lineage of ecopoetics suggests that the discomfort we feel in 2013 when we look at a toxic world has always already been there, albeit for other reasons; that other language users have dealt with problems of how to relate to an alienating or threatening nonhuman before and have found interesting ways to explore and commit to unsettling location and problematic identity rather than run away or ignore the unknown corners and shadows. It is true that unknown and unknowable space can be a deeply threatening idea, and that the world in which we live is currently damaged and toxic. As narratives like “nature” break down and continuing to make space universally into place simply gives us greater license to increase the toxicity of the world, we are forced to realize that we cannot whistle by the graveyard because we are already in it, already are it. It is only by recognizing that we are indeed posthumans surrounded by a troubled postnatural world and remaking our narratives accordingly that we will start to feel, paradoxically, less alien and less afraid.
CHAPTER TWO

POSTMODERN PEOPLE: CHARLES OLSON’S SELF-AWARE CONSTRUCTS

As many Olson scholars point out, Charles Olson was the first person to coin the term “postmodern” in reference to a way of thinking about the world. However, Olson’s sense of the postmodern seems much more based on deliberate trust than current postmodern attitudes. For example, the Norton anthology *Postmodern American Fiction* suggests that while postmodern has a variety of meanings and settings, in terms of a manner of thinking, it refers to a series of “ongoing debates, the most significant of which concern the problematic relationship between the real and unreal; the constructedness of meaning, truth, and history; and the complexities of subjectivity and identity. All of these are marked by a thoroughgoing skepticism toward the foundations and structures of knowledge” (Geyh x). Olson’s own use of the term runs counter to this; while he was very skeptical of contemporary human thought-practices, he believed that it was by rejecting modernism in favor of a premodernist way of thinking that we could understand our world more effectively. In *Charles Olson at the Harbor*, Ralph Maud describes this postmodern:

For Olson, the postmodern was a reversing of the modern, not an intensification. The modern psyche did not feel that it belonged: this can be agreed upon. But postmodernism as now usually understood assumes that there is nowhere it could belong, whereas Olson’s assumption, in his first formulation of it, was that “any POST-MODERN is born with the ancient confidence that he *does* belong.” (Maud 133)
This sense of wanting to create a framework that can explain what a human is in relationship to
the world is characteristic of all of Olson’s work. The desire to belong is referred to in Olson’s
work as the “archaic postmodern”—a sense that by examining myth and how it was created by
and in turn recreated culture, humans will be able to recapture a belonging way of living and be
able to overcome the sense of alienation that has marked modernist relationships to the world.

Olson’s question of how humans can create viable relationships with the rest of the world
should make any ecocritic interested in rereading the poetic canon salivate. That Olson is asking
the same question as us but in 1950 suggests a huge, ecocritically-underexamined tradition of
poetics and thought that may give us new ideas and insights about how we should create
ourselves in the world. This is particularly delightful in light of Olson’s own world-building
epics, whose frameworks mean the poet is forced to consider many of the questions that
contemporary ecocriticism values. Even Olson scholarship is surprisingly amenable to
contemporary ecocritical concerns; while the vocabulary was not yet available to discuss it,
many critics over the years have essentially argued that Olson was able to engage in what today
we would call placemaking, with occasional bioregionalism or reinhabitation explanations.

However, while I think these critiques are interesting, impressively anticipatory, and
useful in understanding Olson’s work and scope, these critiques are also working under
significantly older models of understanding the nonhuman world. Contemporary understanding
of ideas like nature, ecology, space and place, and the relationship of poststructuralist literary
ideas to the nonhuman world have nuanced what in the past has been of necessity painted in
broad strokes. Particularly the evolution of ideas away from a complacent “nature” and toward
recognizing the constructedness of our experiences offer a new way of reading Olson.
Particularly given Olson’s attention to the relationships between language, myth, and the
nonhuman world, Olson’s archaic postmodern has become a more complex gesture than the more straightforward placemaking implied by earlier critics. Olson’s work questions direct mimesis and, finding that it fails, explores alternative ways of understanding the world. As with any experiment, some of these methods are successful and some produce text that is problematic for a variety of reasons. Regardless, Olson’s experiments draw attention to the gap between language and world and offer something other than a simple mimesis to take their place. By refusing mimesis, Olson’s work is taking the first steps toward acknowledging nonhuman space without automatically rushing in to claim it linguistically. By rejecting mimesis in favor of self-conscious constructs, Olson is able to take the first steps toward spatial ecopoetics, and this is his truly postmodern gesture.

**Your Place or Mine?: Placemaking In Olson Scholarship**

Overwhelmingly, the body of Olson scholarship tends to agree on the general direction of Olson’s work. While the vocabulary for it may not have been available to them, these critics generally tend to agree that Olson’s work was an exercise in placemaking in one form or another. As mentioned more explicitly in chapter 1, the idea of placemaking is dependent on the distinction between “space” and “place,” and the human goals implied by each idea. Lawrence Buell, in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, discusses place as “space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness…Place connotes not simply bounded and meaningful location but also dynamic process, including the shaping of place by outside as well as internal influences” (145).

Similarly, in *The West Side of Any Mountain*, J. Scott Bryson described “creating place” as “making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us” (8),

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emphasizing not just the way that human presence and culture shapes a geographic location, but that we often do so deliberately, with specific goals in mind. One contemporary placemaking goal is bioregionalism, which is “life in place conducted in so far as possible in deference to the ecological limits of the place where one lives… a territory defined by natural markers, such as watersheds, but also as a domain of consciousness and a focus of citizenly allegiance that challenges conventional political boundaries. Bioregionalism aspires to respect and restore natural systems while satisfying basic human needs in sustainable ways” (Buell 135). Another is reinhabitation, which builds on bioregionalist methods: reinhabitation “presupposes a prior indigenous dispensation…that lived more lightly on the land and in that sense should be looked back to as a model, and a commitment to an ecologically sustainable lifestyle that involves both ecological literacy and involvement in a place-based community” (Buell 146). As reinhabitation indicates, placemaking often includes historical awareness. This is emphasized in Dan Flores’ “deep time,” through which he describes location as palimpsest that humans have written on. Place history “goes after the reality of the specific, presenting sophisticated, deep time, cross-cultural, environmental histories of places, histories that bring us to think about ourselves as inhabitants of places, of watersheds and topographies, of an evolving piece of space (with an evolving set of fellow inhabitants) different from every other one” (Flores 54-5). Knowing the history of landscape, Flores insists, will force us into inhabitation/placemaking. Flores believes “it is not merely bioregionalism’s focus on ecology and geography, but its emphasis on the close linkage between ecological locale and human culture, its implication that in a variety of ways humans not only alter environments but adapt to them, that ties it to some central questions of environmental history” (46). This historical view results in a much richer sense of place, but also a sense of interconnectedness as history shows how humans have themselves changed to become
specifically local. While placemaking as a base term is broader than bioregionalism in either historical or current modes or reinhabitation, these subsets of the idea serve to demonstrate the kind of choices and experiences that placemaking generally tends to favor.

Already, these narratives about becoming connected to landscape and community by investigating both its current and past geography, both social and physical, should be starting to sound familiar to readers of Olson scholarship. Given Olson’s interest in specific geographies like Gloucester, his interest in consuming and rewriting history, and his epic goals of replacing modernism’s sense of fragmentary disconnection with archaic postmodernism’s renewed sense of belonging in the world, many critics have discussed Olson in ways that are congruent with what we would now describe as placemaking. This large goal is fairly consistent throughout Olson scholarship, although clearly the shape and tone of criticism changes as literary theory changes shape over time. For the purposes of this discussion, I am going to limit my investigation to texts that are specifically interested in Olson in relation to the nonhuman world, as other work, while interesting, is a bit off topic.8

In 1986, Andrew Ross’ *The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry* sought to explain why Olson valued “objectism” as a way to break with modernism. He describes his project as exploring how Olson created “a new, kinetic, or antimimetic discourse, a nonlinear

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8 Examples here would include studies that seem to be ecocritical but are really more general poetry studies, such as Jed Rasula’s *This Compost*. On the surface, the title suggests Rasula may be doing ecocriticism by using an organic trope to examine Olson, but in practice compost is just a greenish metaphor for Olson’s writing process, and has little to do with an external nonhuman world. Another example of a study that is interesting but outside the scope of ecocriticism is Miriam Nichols’ *Radical Affections*, which investigates how Olson’s practice is a Tao that uses “religious feeling” or “love” to link both Olson and readers to the nonhuman world. While it might seem to be ecocritical, particularly as she celebrates goals like emplacedness (Nichols 11), her focus on religion and the poet’s inner world means that while it is certainly an interesting look at an underexamined idea within Olson studies, she seems to be doing something other than ecocriticism. I think this is particularly true in light of her method, which seems to be neither English nor religion department method, and which consistently links things like religious authority and landscape, which ecocriticism generally suggests is a problematic gesture.
approach to historicity, and a plea for a new *spatial* realism that would incorporate phenomenological models from the physical sciences into poetic discourse. I argue that each of these projects, in turn, appeals directly to a phenomenological ideal of disclosing a more authentic subjectivity through the ‘process’ of nature” (xvii). Essentially, Ross’ argument is that Olson thinks subjectivity and the device of mimesis artificially create a gap between a human and the world, and that by returning humans to an object-state, he can close the gap and write us into the world again. Instead of reproducing reality through mimetic language, Olson “reenacts” reality through the “nonmimetic imagination,” which is what makes Olson’s mapping project functional:

His equation of ‘congruence’ is one which is mapped, or made to measure, because it assumes that there is a natural a priori space occupied by a particular constituent reality, and that it is the task of language to honor the caliber and proportions of that space. The phenomenon of space uncovers the true nature (*physis*) of man’s ‘homeland,’ the revelatory form of a lived (not learned) knowledge which bears with it a presence primordially determined, hitherto hidden but now revealed as natural, measurable, and finite. (115)

I take Ross to be saying here that it is through nonmimetic imagination that we are able to have direct experience of the unconstructed nonhuman world. By closing the gap and giving us access to the “natural, measurable, and finite” world, Olson is able to create place—to make of location a “homeland.”

Stephen Fredman picks up the thread in 1993 in *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition*. In this text, Fredman argues that American

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9 Ross never concretely defines this term (or indeed, place), which is not unusual for the period. I take it to mean “location” and not necessarily be a discussion of place or space in the way we might use those terms in 2013.
poetry’s constant desire to be ever-modern has created a poetry that lacks the “grounding” of the European poetic tradition. He focuses on poets that have created grounding methods other than tradition, one of which is Charles Olson. Tying Olson to Thoreau, he suggests that both use “containment” as a grounding strategy. For Olson, this “containment” involves empirical engagement with the present and thus with the past, as in his emphasis on finding out for oneself:

As an act of situating, the spiritual discipline advocated by Olson and Thoreau places the individual in a particular relation to the outside world. Disregarding the call of an unearthly divinity, these writers pursue a regimen of austerity that can, they claim, bring them into accord, not with the beyond, but with the extensive world itself…Olson, like Thoreau, insists upon the irreversible order of containment and extension: extension by itself is pernicious, like the superstition that Walden is a bottomless pond; true extension, the ability to be situated anywhere, is granted only by containment. (Fredman 34)

In other words, by limiting one’s knowledge to the local present and historical as found out by active engagement (as Thoreau did when sounding Walden after hearing local rumors the pond was bottomless), a person gains actual knowledge that has real use-value in connecting him or her to the real world. In other words, rather than separating people from the world via false ideas, this method can “restore a kind of parity between the self and the world” (35). This also explains Olson’s love of Gloucester and the fishermen, who are contained by being self-reliant individuals in a self-sustaining community, and who reject invasions or attempts to loosen Gloucester from its specific place:

The determined resistance of “14 men setting down / on Cape Ann” provides an accurate measure of the possibilities of an American relationship to work,
materials, landscape, and community; Olson points out how aggressively the protestant work ethic has countered such possibilities. As a place for grounding, the American landscape must be approached, he feels, through self-containment rather than rapacity, for only self-containment allows us to ‘set down’ upon, to inhabit carefully, the land. (Fredman 52)

From this, it seems clear that Fredman’s containment is very similar to bioregionalism: direct engagement with both human and nonhuman histories, over time, produce place. From within the containment framework, it even follows that Olson’s interest in history and myth even is a nod to the idea that people in the past lived in a way more compatible to the landscape, and we should emulate their practices: reinhabitation. In a move that is very congruent with placemaking’s activism edge, Fredman even structures his Olson argument into sections discussing not just poetics, but how this work has deep spiritual and political ramifications.

As the 1990s progressed, ecocriticism as a study developed, and people began doing directly ecocritical readings of Olson. One early article with a strongly ecofeminist edge (though the writer does not use the term) is Burton Hatlen’s “Toward a Common Ground: Versions of Place in the Poetry of Charles Olson, Edward Dorn, and Theodore Enslin.” Hatlen focuses more on the latter two writers than Olson, but does an interesting critique of Olson as the predecessor of these two location-interested later writers. This article is notable for being one of the less-celebratory explorations of Olson’s placemaking. It describes how Olson wrestles with not just the politically problematic stance inherited from Pound, but the role humans play in response to the landscape, questioning whether we construct it or it constructs us. “Is the person a function of the local, a product of a specific historical juncture? Or is the local a function of the person who brings that time and place into the fullness of its being, through an act of poetic
imagination? Olson wants to have it both ways, but can he?” (245) Eventually, Hatlen argues, Olson declares that we can have real or immediate access to the landscape in the way the Gloucester fishermen do, and that justifies Olson’s sense that he and his memory can contain or be directly representative of the world. In other words, the article suggests that Olson saw himself as a placemaker. But this is a problem for Hatlen: “Olson gravitated toward such a mythic reading of the American scene. And this mythic project seems to me deeply problematic, for in claiming to define the ‘real’ meaning and purpose of the American scene, the poet is, I believe, actually engaged in the egoistic appropriation of the prospect before us” (246). This is when ecofeminism comes into play: “The hoary trope of the woman as the land and the man as the conqueror and/or occupant of the land offers a useful example of both the power of the mythic impulse and its problematic consequences” (Hatlen 246-47). By performing a traditional occupancy of the land both within the poems and as a writer using landscape for his own egoistic purposes, Olson performs a doubled colonizing gesture, using and silencing women and landscape simultaneously. While the article does acknowledge that many writers have found Olson’s stance liberating and instructive, so that to call him misogynist is falsely simplistic, ultimately Olson’s placemaking is too colonizing to be genuinely productive in the present. Olson claims that “my memory is / the history of time,” which is a bit of a stretch for Hatlen—fine to be in the world, but a problem to claim to be existence: “The egoistic principle seems to be taking over here” (Hatlen 248).

While there are still numerous examples I could use, I’ll end this recap of standard placemaking readings of Olson with Matthew Cooperman’s overtly ecocritical “Charles Olson: Archaeologist of Morning, Ecologist of Evening” from 2000. While most readings of Olson are interested in poetics, Cooperman says, he is interested in Olson’s poems’ “profound ecological
vision and sense of crisis” (208) as we see in our “contemporary alienation from nature and its deep-seated origins.” Because of Olson’s interest in using history as well as the body and location to rebuild Western civilization, “The cultural revisions he argues for posit not merely a more authentic poetry but a way of thinking, feeling, and participating in language that brings us closer to our experience of the natural world in its organic processes and to a more fully realized relationship to Being” (209-210). Cooperman directly cites Olson’s obsession with space and place as predecessors to bioregionalism, and suggests that Olson is best read through a “philosophy of organicism” (214). He describes how, “By returning poetry to actions (speech, muthos) as well as to words (discrimination, logos) Olson posits an experiential discourse that at all points implies engagement with the actual world” (218-19). This actual engagement with the world creates a link between language and the nonhuman such that “The act of trying to say is always an act of location” (223). The final result of this is humans emplaced in Gloucester, with the gap between human and nonhuman completely collapsed: “Gloucester is seen in all its bioregional complexity, but its particulars are made to yield to a larger awareness; singular places relate intimately to other places and so become a larger place….Whether we see this as metaphor, the workings of an ecosystem, fractal symmetry, or Gaia, polis articulates our simulated reality in landscapes” (225). The goal of getting us all emplaced in Gloucester becomes clear: Cooperman’s ecocriticism is also environmental activism, as we see when he says of Olson that “Ultimately, his barometer—as a writer and as someone to be read—is utility…his searching provides an ecopoetical system that is prescriptive, ethical, and responsible to our ecological crisis” (212). This is clear, textbook placemaking, and demonstrates all the concerns place-centered critics have in their engagement of the world, from closing the mimetic gap to pushing readers towards overt activist practices. It is also, as I hope I’ve demonstrated,
the culmination of a specific trend in Olson scholarship that is also interested in location. It is rare indeed to find Olson work that is both interested in the physical nonhuman world and does not argue for Olson as a placemaker.

All the effort invested in placemaking is an attempt to provide solutions to the problem of space. Space is not simply the opposite of place, though as “areal form in the abstract…carrying the implication of locational specificity of some sort without any particular affect” (Buell 147) it does seem to imply an oppositional relationship to place’s dependency on human culture. “But space is not value-neutral,” (147) Buell contends. It has many wide definitions from physical to social or metaphorical; Buell points out that many of these have become excuses to colonize, invade, or possess, since the location is unused or hostile. Bryson suggests that to think about space is a way of “recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable” (8). Pointing out that most writers tend to incorrectly think that “space is just another way of saying placelessness” (16), Bryson suggests that this is because the more we think of space (the unknowable), the more space (unknown) there is, showing us how small and limited we are, which we often perceive as a threat, even a sublime threat, which is contained by human placemaking. Like Buell, he also suggests that another mechanism may be at work: “while the process of place-making is a vital activity in the work of ecopoets, we should also realize that it is almost always balanced with, or better yet, harmonized, with a healthy dose of space-consciousness, since to see oneself as a metaphorical place-maker is to be tempted to also see oneself as owner, or even literal creator, of the surrounding landscape” (18). In other words, it is tempting to read implied consent into space, since, after all, “nothing” is there which might object.
However, universal placemaking prevents our access to the virtues space has that place does not. Buell points out that “place can become regressive and repressive when it is thought of in essentialized terms as an unchanging unitary entity, as in ethnocentric appeals to *Heimat* or local patriotism” (145-46). Space, then, can be a solution to this, not a negative placelessness but a liberation from the geographic and ideological constraints of a location. Bryson’s suggestion is that writers have emphasized place to the detriment of space, which does not benefit from human intervention, and as a result we need to learn to acknowledge that place/space tension will always exist and we should be respectful of space’s unknowability despite the way it makes us uneasy.

In *Greening the Lyre*, Gilcrest suggests that place’s attempt to speak for the nonhuman is problematic: “At issue is the degree to which humans may be said to comprehend the interests of nonhuman entities as well as the ability of humans to ‘represent’ such interests faithfully” (41). While he does not use the terms place/space specifically, his recommendation is for writing that “acknowledges the ontological autonomy of the nonhuman….encourages, to whatever extent possible, an awareness of nonhuman entities unmediated by linguistic structure” (133-34), which seems to me to be a clear call to spatial rather than palatial thinking. Space requires humans to not claim, not make place, to experience unpleasant feelings of uneasiness, not-at-homeness, not-knowing. Recognizing and letting space be is more than just a kindness; it is a way of denying mimesis and minding the linguistic gap between human and nonhuman. Timothy Morton suggests that over time, “place” as a term evolved to mean something more specific, more locked-down, and he finds this counterproductive. Morton points out that place or environment are actually things that, in his terms, are background and not foreground; we cannot point at place or environment. They exist as not-this, as a “what is it?” that has no obvious answer. But the tendency to want definitive place remains. “Place is a function of suffering,” Morton says.
“‘This land is my land’ is a symptom of injustice. The politics of place, then, is a struggle to achieve a state in which the question of place, the question that is place, can emerge as a question. Utopia would thus look more like critique and debate than an affirmation” (177).

While he does not specifically use the term space, his overall stance toward the nonhuman world is very spatially congruent. For him, place-as-specific-thing is an aggressive claiming; instead he wants us to understand location as not locked down, constantly not just in question but a question itself. To do this, Morton suggests, is to avoid falsely collapsing the gap between human and nonhuman. To me, this strongly suggests choosing to behave towards the world as space rather than place.

While, as I’ve shown above, the majority of Olson scholarship tends to focus on Olson as placemaker, I think that these discussions are working from a time period when place and space did not have the robust definitions they do today. Fortunately, with more nuanced and thorough understandings of these terms, it is possible to look back over Olson’s work and reconsider his project in light of current understanding. To do so, I believe, is to recognize that, as Bryson suggests, place and space are always in tension in Olson’s work, and as a result, Olson is an excellent point of departure for an ecopoetic lineage that begins the difficult work of moving past mimesis in favor of recognizing the way linguistic constructs mind the gap between human and nonhuman. With this in mind, I want to go back through Olson’s work with an eye to spatial rather than platiai interests, and revisit the work his “ancient postmodern” does in minding the linguistic gap between human and nonhuman.
The Poet/Nonhuman Relationship: “Projective Verse” and “Human Universe”

One of the incredible temptations in doing this kind of re-reading is to believe that the poet magically intuited the ideas of the current day well in advance. I certainly do not want to fall into that trap; as he was working well before the environmental movement was able to be thought of as such\(^1\), I certainly do not want to insist that Olson is some sort of spatial prophet. However, within Olson’s work, and particularly his essays that, as Fredman insists, are as important as the poems themselves in the body of artistic work\(^2\), there are the beginnings of a poetics that is aware of the linguistic gap between the human and the nonhuman and is deeply skeptical of mimesis. While Olson is not the first writer to be wary of mimesis, his specific nexus of interests allows for the possibility that rather than falsely bridge the gap between human language and nonhuman world, we might be able to use our linguistic constructs to get a better sense of who we are and thus indicate what cannot be captured in language. In other words, echoing Bryson’s space/place tension, Olson’s work allows for not just placemaking readings for the possibility of staying with what we know to be a construct and letting space remain unknown.

Two of Olson’s big poetics essays contain the roots of Olson’s relationship between the poet/human and the nonhuman world: “Projective Verse” and “Human Universe.” These essays

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\(^1\) Sylvia Hood Washington, in *Packing Them In*, cites the “white, middle class environmental movement” as starting in the 1970s and the modern environmental justice movement in the 1980s (3). However, the premise of this fascinating study is that grassroots environmental justice groups concerned with local environmental problems, many tied to issues of work or housing within changing cities, vastly predate what we think of as “generic” environmentalism motivated by concern for the planet or larger systems. In this sense, given his preoccupation with landscape via work and particularly threats to Gloucester’s traditional fishing industry, Olson may well be able to be read as writing about environmental justice for his fishermen, who share similarities with Washington’s slaughterhouse workers in Chicago.

\(^2\) Fredman tends to focus not on the poetry but on the prose essays because “in the absence of an embracing cultural tradition, the prose statements perform an important duty by authorizing the poetry. An awareness of this crucial quality of the prose is absolutely essential for reading American poetry….When readers isolate a particular American poem and debate whether it ‘works,’ they often miss the ‘work’ of American poetry” (3). While I am not quite in agreement that work like Olson’s is unintelligible without the essay support, I do agree that poets’ essays can often themselves be included in the formal body of artistic work instead of being dismissed to appendices.
are interesting, complicated explorations of the relationship Olson thinks poets (and by extension, all humans) do have or should have to the world around them, and they provide a coherent worldview which can be then applied to the poems. Continuing the long debate over what poems are for, Olson’s essays tackle both art and the actual experience of being a human, and how poetry can become a record of that experience. The result is a complicated relationship between poet and world that, for Olson, is often more ready to question what a poet is and the role/capabilities of language than what the world is. The 1950 essay “Projective Verse” can be (and has been) read to support Olson as placemaker, or Olson’s belief that we can have real unconstructed experiences of the nonhuman world through the physical medium of our bodies. However, I think that this is often too one-dimensional a reading of Olson’s essay, which shows a lot of awareness and thought about the artifice of poetry, including a disdain for the idea that artifice should be concealed or that we should act as though it is not there.

Olson offers several interesting perspectives on the poet’s relation to the rest of the world, culminating in the “Objectism” response or antidote to Objectivism. “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay” (Olson, *Human Universe* 52). Early in this essay, Olson is suggesting that a poet is not the divinely inspired, isolated genius, but valuable for being a specific geographic point, and a specific collation of events from that point. While this statement is often in earlier essays read as a placemaking indicator, I think it also suggests a high degree of awareness of the poet as mediating process. To make form the content, “perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception” (52). In this way, the poet is always the subject of every poem, and in a way that prefigures writers like John Ashbery, each poem becomes deliberately about human in/capability and perception. While it is
impossible for a poet to not be present in his/her own writing, many writers attempt to hide their artifice; Olson’s commentary on the work poets do through language can make us aware of the poem’s interpretive act.

The descriptive functions generally have to be watched, every second, in projective verse, because of their easiness, and thus the drain on the energy which composition by field allows into a poem. Any slackness takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job in hand, from the push of the line under hand at the moment, under the reader’s eye, in his moment. (Olson, *Human Universe* 55)

Many poetic versions of realism work hard at using “descriptive functions” to assure the reader that there is no interpretive act and that the poem faithfully represents reality: mimesis. The goal seems to be to curate sensory information so carefully that the reader will not realize she’s in a museum at all. On the other hand, Olson’s sense is that overdescriptive inwardness that pretends it is not there will ruin the poem. Instead, the process of writing is itself foregrounded; rather than trying to show us the world, Olson’s form tries to show us what it is like to write poetry. While this may be in the service of body-in-place, the more I am aware of process, the more I am aware that everything in front of me is human language, human process.

This all culminates in Olson’s ideas about Objectism. “Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interface of the individual as ego, of the ‘subject’ and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects” (59-60). This is a sticking point for a lot of Olson criticism about placemaking, as Olson is often read here to be phenomenologically closing the human/nonhuman
gap\(^{12}\), but I read Olson not as suggesting we ignore human difference, but as disrupting the traditional view of human that allows for such things as the sort of god’s-eye view of the world that allows us to assume that mimesis is accurate and fair to the rest of the world. By aligning himself with the physical world but doing so in language, Olson’s work here highlights the tension between humans and the nonhuman world, putting a spotlight on all our interactions in general but particularly those which occur, like this one does, through language. By suggesting that we can simply shift our allegiance by saying it, for a reader inclined to think about it, the constructed nature of our relationship to the world is brought center-stage. Olson continues to say that poets who refuse to recognize this will find little to talk about but themselves because they can’t see the rest of the world, “But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share” (60). Olson’s argument here seems to be that, counterintuitively, limiting our conceptions of what a human is and can do—which we might read as minding the gap between human and world—will have the effect of letting us find and thus push the boundaries of what is accessible and possible for both human perception and for poetics. This desire for limitation on language and description seems to me to be a step in the direction not of placemaking, but of David Gilcrest’s call for a restraint on the use of language in order to avoid colonizing or claiming the nonhuman.

While “Projective Verse” took the fairly clear form of a guide to writing poems, the 1951 essay “Human Universe” is more of an ambitious, ambiguous attempt to figure out the relationship that Olson believes humans have with their surrounding world. While this essay may have some problems from the point of view of traditional philosophy, his exploration of the

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\(^{12}\) Miriam Nichols and Andrew Ross both make these gestures, for example, though in vastly different ways and by appealing to very different versions of phenomenology.
“human universe” in context of/opposition to the nonhuman universe is an interesting study of the poet’s role in response to the rest of the world. Olson begins to describe what he perceives as the problem with most writing:

What makes most acts—of living and of writing—unsatisfactory, is that the person and/or the writer satisfy themselves that they can only make a form (what they say or do, or a story, a poem, whatever) by selecting from the full content some face of it, or plane, some part. And at just this point, by just this act, they fall back on the dodges of discourse, and immediately, they lose me, I am no longer engaged, this is not what I know is the going-on (and of which going-on I, as well as they, want some illumination, and so, some pleasure). It comes out a demonstration, a separating out, an act of classification, and so, a stopping, and all that I know is, it is not there, it has turned false. For any of us, at any instant, are juxtaposed to any experience, even an overwhelming single one, on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive which we inherit can declare. (Olson, *Human Universe* 5)

In an echo of the sentiment that drove poetic Modernism to replicate Cubist paintings in words, Olson’s is angry about limited constructedness that purports to present a totality. And because for him, the poetic process and the relationship between poet/world is one of the main subjects of poetry, any poem which makes a totality argument is automatically not just uninteresting, but constructing the wrong kind of myth. Olson goes on to say that the linearity of this type of writing means that what we receive is not “the act of the instant [but] the act of thought about the instant” (4), an important distinction because most such poetry purports to nevertheless mimaetically recreate the instance. Instead of offering someone a legitimate relationship with the
world, such writing becomes a construct that is all the more limited for not suggesting that it is a construct. When writers construct without acknowledging constructedness, “this is not what I know is the going-on”: a reader who is paying attention can see that mimesis is a lie.

The solution for Olson lies in revamping writing style and subsequently the thinking and language processes that underlie that writing style. While his solution is certainly not necessarily congruent with contemporary ecopoetic practice in general or spatial ecopoetics in particular, his solutions do set him forth on a path that will eventually lead American poetics to those methodologies. The solution Olson proposes is empirical attentiveness characterized by a rapid paratactic image barrage of physical world-based experience. By clearly and deliberately presenting this perceptual experience as perceptual experience, the reader is presented with as much of the “full content” as is possible, including the reminder that there are things happening that will necessarily escape the writer’s linguistic construct.

For the truth is, that the management of external nature so that none of its virtu is lost, in vegetables or in art, is as much a delicate juggling of her content as is the same juggling by any one of us our own. And when men are not such jugglers, are not able to manage a means of expression the equal of their own or nature’s intricacy, the flesh does choke. The notion of fun comes to displace work as what we are here for. (8)

As much as Olson drew attention to mimesis’ failure, he also certainly seems to imply in this section that he can indeed create “a means of expression” which can, if not mimetically represent, then at least “equal” the nonhuman world. While this might be read as Olson’s moment of closing the gap, I don’t think that “delicate juggling” inherently implies placemaking. Just suggesting that we must “manage a means of expression the equal” to the nonhuman world
does not mean that we must use that means of expression to be the nonhuman world, and in fact, given Olson’s hesitancy to accept mimesis, I think an equally viable reading is that language and world are two separate things, but to avoid the moment where “the flesh does choke,” language needs to be serving a real philosophical role. Language is necessary to help us find our place in the world, but if simple mimesis does not allow us to accomplish the work that we are here for, the trick is to find what will.

Olson’s sense of what humans are is more complicated and interesting than many readings give him credit for; while a common stance is to look at Olson as using the body to phenomenologically close the distance between human and nonhuman, his construction of the human experience is much more nuanced than that:

I am not able to satisfy myself that these so-called inner things [thoughts, dreams, the ‘mind’] are so separable from the objects, persons, events which are the content of them and by which man represents or reenacts them…. [this is] why art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact. And if man is once more to possess intent in his life, he has to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again. (10)

Though not discussing it in these terms, Olson seems to me to be recognizing the place/space tension inherent in any body of work: that there is both an unconstructed external reality and that humans’ experience is constructed. Olson rejects disembodied descriptive forms which hide their artifice, instead insisting that the art experience is one of actively constructing from one’s own intimate place: the body. The idea seems to be that the artist’s or language user’s
responsibility, or ethical mode of behavior in the world, is to be aware of the construction process, and the way in which it necessarily changes (converts) anything it receives. In this way, Olson seems to me to be doing something completely congruent with contemporary ecopoetic thought.

It is this quality that makes Olson not just the point of departure for this study, but also someone doing something significantly different than traditional placemaking. While Olson is certainly not entirely spatially situated, he is definitely opening the doors to a version of understanding location that is not entirely place-dependent. Importantly, Olson’s use of language is one which questions the validity of mimesis and straightforward narrative, and which is suspicious of any writer who hides his or her artifice in favor of a representation that emanates from nowhere, or to be presenting an unmediated experience of the world. While rare, other critics have recognized this quality in his work: in 2009, Joshua Corey’s excellent “Tansy City: Charles Olson and the Prospects for the Avant-Pastoral” works to recognize the way in which Olson is “a site of convergence between the imperatives of postmodernism and pastoral poetry” (111). His key concept, the “avant-pastoral,” is aware of the erasures of traditional pastoral as well as the postmodern tendency to reject anything but human sociality, using the flaws of each to “create a forefield in which pastoral and postmodern ways of knowing can interact by re-imagining the human relationship to non-human nature within the poetic context of his hometown, the ‘tansy city’ of Gloucester’ (113). This avant-pastoral combines postmodernist language techniques and skepticism about mimesis and authenticity with the pastoral’s interest in situating humans in the nonhuman world. Instead of reductionist nature narrative, the avant-pastoralist must attempt a more difficult and complex form of representation, one which situates the human subject in relation to a socio-
ecological totality that cannot be presented solely through images…Ecological processes and the natural history of biomes will be crucial to avant-pastoral, as they are not to its ironic postmodern cousin; at the same time, the social cannot be separated from the ecological, especially under postmodern conditions, and it too must be taken into account. The middle landscape of pastoral becomes not a landscape to be mimetically represented, but a form of textual distantiation whose ultimate goal is to present the reader with his or her real relations to a totality, one that can otherwise only appear as fragments. (Corey 116)

While Corey’s analysis, with its emphasis on ecology and natural history, is a bit too unquestioning of science as ultimate ontological authority for my taste, the way in which he explores Olson’s body and subsequent language use seems an excellent way of positioning Olson’s work as a transition between a poetics of straightforward mimesis and experimental avant-garde poetics.

Corey cites Olson as adopting and adapting Pound’s techniques to create an avant-pastoral map. The key for doing this is our own bodily experience, as cited above in the “Human Universe” essay: Olson’s body “becomes one of the ‘fragments of reality’ that for Olson is necessary to oppose the impoverished consensual reality of the culture industry” (119). Because we are both body and not, in avant-pastoral terms, we have access to both what he would call holistic or organic experiences as well as scientific or postmodern ways of knowing. By

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13 While I resist this term, if only because it is often both heavily loaded and ill-defined, his use of “organicism” is in keeping with his use of pastoralism. That said, I also find pastoralism to be a concept with more problems than solutions, and more opportunity for erasure, trauma, and oppression than there is for benefits of being a liminal space between human and nonhuman universes. Corey acknowledges that even as postmodern a pastoral as Olson’s still can be problematic: “Olson does not entirely avoid the naïve idealization of nature and simple people that categorizes pastoral; and his fetishization of the figure of the fisherman can lead him into some troubling ecological blind spots. Nor, arguably, is his intention to construct as partial a pastoral vision as he has: a will toward homogeneity and ‘the center’ recurs again and again in both The Maximus Poems and Olson’s prose” (124).
rejecting structures that seek to either enlarge or falsely close the gap between human and nonhuman, Corey describes “Olson’s ‘FIELD COMPOSITION’” as “meant to break up a false, naively mimetic organicism in favour of a performative non-organicism that is more true to human existence as a node in ‘the larger force’ of nature” (119). While I resist the idea of human as node in nature, I think he’s absolutely correct about Olson’s work using the idea of using strong awareness of body and language to create something that is not organic but thoughtfully created, and not hidden artifice but deliberately performative, to make humans not less but more aware of their active, enacted relationships to themselves and the world around them. For Corey, this avant-pastoral site becomes Gloucester, where place and space (though Corey does not use those terms either) remain in constant tension: “Olson’s polis is a process in which separate totalities—the totality of individual experience, the totality of human life, and the totality of nature—contest and conflict with each other, without easy or false resolutions. This force field of conflicts can only be maintained without collapsing into one totality or another by the vigilance of individual perception” (123). The final emphasis on perception, awareness of awareness, brings us back to Olson’s primary focus: how do we interact correctly with the world?

Olson’s “An Ode on Nativity” (Olson, *Selected* 42-46) is a good example of his perceptual attentiveness, rejection of direct mimesis, and emphasis on constructedness. The title suggests a very traditional, formal way of thinking about birth and death—and the poem certainly is that, discussing both the birth of Olson’s daughter/the year/the poem and death in the form of a funeral/the year/a mill burning. However, in thinking about these things, the poem shows a negotiation process between a human concept and the world that has triggered thoughts of this concept—and the construction of the world that the concept triggers. In keeping with
Olson’s projective verse methodology, the poem is full of obscurities, strange connections, and images that rapidly shift back and forth in time and space, forcing us to question the relationship between language and everything else. The poem’s first section begins with the imposition of human frameworks on the world:

All cries rise, & the three of us
observe how fast Orion
marks midnight
at the climax
of the sky (1-5)

This way of understanding the evening is human-centered, as the speaker shapes a random pattern of stars into a human form—even the idea of “midnight” is only a human construct imposed upon planetary cycles. However, this experience suddenly launches the speaker backwards in his own life, almost inflicting memory on him:

as red in the southwest
as the orb of her was, for this boy, once,
the first time he saw her whole halloween face northeast
across the skating pond as he came down to the ice, December
his seventh year (7-11)

Just as “Human Universe” suggests, the way to understand the process of “conversion” by moving inward before moving out again. The poem seems to take this sudden historical turn not because it is next in the speaker’s story, but because it is impossible to understand someone’s experience in the world without understanding the mental frameworks that create that experience, and which experience can subsequently re-ordering the speaker’s frameworks. This sense of external events or things that the speaker hurriedly fits into a human construct before they go past continues throughout the poem. This section of the poem ends with horses falling from a burning building:

into the buried Blackstone River the city
had hidden under itself, had grown over
At any time, & this time
a city
jangles

Man’s splendor
is a question of which
birth (27-34)

The image here of a burning building that collapses into a hidden river suggests the precarious relationship that humans have with their environment: the constructed in proximity to the unknowable: place surrounded by space. Yet the named-ness of the river makes it just as much a construct as the building itself. The enjambment makes it unclear whether the river was hiding the city, the city was hiding the river, or the city was hiding itself as new city growth eclipsed older areas. This prolific image of spilling forth and not being clear on who or what is hindering or causing growth of what else is very suggestive of the poem itself: what is providing the real impetus of the poem here? And what is being described? Early in the poem, we wonder if this might be mimetic: a poet deliberately showing the world? Is the world forcing itself on the poet and reaching us through that medium? This ambiguity means that our attention is drawn to language both in the capacity of what it can tell us and the moments or events or things that it fails. The result is an uneasy truce with whatever lies beyond the poem that resists simple placemaking as much as it engages me in the idea of a location. That a city “jangles” suggests that this tension between human and nonhuman is always present; that our “splendor” is a question of “which/birth” very much puts the idea of the poem as direct individual product of the poet’s reflective mind into question. At the same time, it does suggest that understanding the origin of things—ourselves, our ideas, the poem, etc.—is the key to this splendor. Olson’s poem

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14 As Buell points out, “space does not in and of itself require the idea of place (as a physical geographer would be quick to point out), whereas physical place is located within space” (*Future* 145).
seems to be insisting that this kind of historical view\textsuperscript{15} is a necessary component of projective verse. By highlighting the artifice, this poem shows that it too is a structure precariously built over a gap, one through which we may fall at any time, emphasized by the thin, jagged stanzas that barely trace an arc over the blank space of the page.

While the goal of this poem is certainly to think about events in the speaker’s life, and in no way is it overtly a poem about the nonhuman world, it nonetheless becomes a poem about a location which “rings // in & out of / tune” (72-73), where memories flicker and blur as the vision of the poem moves. The landscape changes from a river with green banks that has now been absorbed by the city, time moves through seasons from summer to winter and back again, sight focuses on humans and city and then rapidly shifts to animals and plants. Section three, which is much more overtly about the way this poem is written, opens “All things now rise, and the cries of men to be born / in ways afresh, aside from all old narratives, away / from intervals too wide to mark the grasses” (77-79). As always, this is both about literal human birth and also the creation of a new poetics, which itself is a new way of being in the world, therefore offering rebirth to already-born, already-taught readers.

\begin{quote}
Any season, in this fresh time
is off & on to that degree that any of us miss
the vision, lose the instant and decision, the close
which can be nothing more and no thing else
than that which unborn form you are the content of, which you
alone can make to shine, throw that like light
even where the mud was and now there is a surface
ducks, at least, can walk on. And I
have company
in the night (88-97)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} As opposed to placemaking bioregionalist Dan Flores’ “deep time,” Olson’s historical view serves not to close the distance between human and nonhuman but to focus on it. The effect is as estranging as it is connecting, echoing the place/space push/pull yet again.
This is not only describing but enacting the new poetics. These lines seem to be emphasizing perception’s role in both being in the world and writing: humans have selective sensory impressions, so we can only pay attention to so many things at once, and thus the narratives that we construct are dependent on our own sensory ability to pay attention to the world around us and, perhaps even more importantly, how we process those impressions. This is what creates the “unborn form you are the content of”: my own being in the world, some of which is under my control and some of which is not, creates both what I will say and how I will say it out of the collective total of things that happen near, to, or in me. This narrative is what allows me action in the world, what creates “light / even where the mud was”. However, the results of this construction are interesting: “a surface / ducks, at least, can walk on”. While there is a surface that offers support, or ground to stand on, the utility of that surface is in doubt: ducks aren’t very heavy. What supports a duck may not support a human. Also, the freezing is a vaguely implied note of warning: narrative, once created, is hard to reset except by smashing and letting the ice freeze again. The ice both offers support and limits what the water can be or where it can go, and so our linguistic constructs are the same. As a reader, when I read this section, I find myself very aware that this poem is both nothing but a story I’m reading and at the same time it very much has the capacity to shape my way of understanding the nonhuman world around me.

Ending on the idea that the speaker of the poem has company in the night suggests that even though these constructs are not mimetically accurate, they can both connect us to other humans as I am now connected to the speaker, and they can perhaps suggest something about what the night is like, even if I can’t see it. This final image is very spatial; by not really illuminating anything other than itself, the poem suggests the possibility of things outside language’s grasp without actually discussing them. This technique of gesturing at the nonhuman
without overdescribing is hugely useful for spatial ecopoetics. To an ecocritical reader, this seems particularly resonant in the last lines of the last section, which are of course about the contrast between birth and death, but also about the relationship of the poem/speaker to the world in the “city out of tune”:

is there any birth
any other splendor than
the brilliance of the going on, the loneliness
whence all our cries arise? (120-124)

Since this is a poem about the poet’s relationship to the world, the contrast here between the “brilliance” and the “loneliness” of being in the world is interesting: while many poetics, including placemaking poetics, suggest that the way to feel less alienated in the world is to describe it and thus connect yourself to it, this poem does not end on that pat answer. By asking “is this going-on ending my loneliness?” and following it with silence, the poem does not suggest that description has solved a feeling of alienation or the problem of how to offer poetic mimesis. Instead, the only answer we’re given is to look inward and understand the human desire to describe as a direct result of awareness of this alienation which is, and perhaps should be, unbridgeable. After all, it is only by living in this tension between myself and the world around me that I find a way to say anything useful at all. In the end, this poem seems to suggest, even when triggered by the external world, the only thing a human can describe is him/herself. That description is useful, but only insofar as we understand it as a description of ourselves. The more we look at the stars, the grass, or a pond, the more we’ll see a newborn daughter, a grandfather as a teenager, or our own methods of thinking, and recognize them for what they are.

By recognizing that this is the human poetic perceptual process, we are not alarmed by our failure to offer accurate, mimetic placemaking. Instead we are reassured that this is what a human looks like in the world—and meanwhile, the nonhuman world is not poetically colonized.
Anti-Mimetic Myth: Scigaj’s Language and Olson’s Maximus

All of the above is well and good, but the question remains of how Olson’s devotion to myth fits into the idea of rejecting mimesis in favor of construction. If it the poems can be read as using awareness of the linguistic gap between human and nonhuman to put a spotlight on the ways in which the world is constructed, his work can be read as using myth in a similar way: highlighting artifice as a way of forcing humans to look at ourselves and be aware of our processes such that we become aware of both constructs and the unconstructed nonhuman that escapes our grasp. Scigaj’s sense of what an “ecopoet” is and does helps offer a contemporary reading of Olson’s interest in others’ myths and his own subsequent mythologizing in the form of Maximus.

First, to be clear: Charles Olson is not what Leonard Scigaj would term an “ecopoet,” since such a poet “persistently stresses human cooperation with nature conceived as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems” (37), and the goal of such ecopoetry is to create activism. This, clearly, doesn’t apply to Olson. But the method Scigaj suggests these ecopoets will use to connect us to the world around us is in tune with Olson’s archaic postmodern project:

By juxtaposing and highlighting sedimented language as just that, worn-out, followed by language teased out slowly with fresh and arresting metaphors and images, ecopoets demonstrate what Heidegger calls…the fresh, originary language that reveals the poet as true philosopher actively engaged in the moment-to-moment quest toward self-realization on the way toward Being, where he ‘risk[s] asking the question’ of how one arrives at authentic Being and ‘get[s] underway toward the call,’ the active ‘blossoming’ of Being….If words cannot capture referential reality in any essentialistic way, what an ecopoet can do is
direct our gaze beyond the printed page toward firsthand experiences that approximate the poet’s intense involvement in the authentic experience that lies behind his originary language. (Scigaj 41)

By “fresh and arresting metaphors and images,” I take Scigaj to mean not just a shinier, newer version of an old cliché, but rather a new *method* of making comparisons or appealing to our senses. In a parallel to Olson’s own essays on how we should understand the world, Scigaj is calling for experimental language to redescribe and heighten awareness of the poetic process. This experimental language, which I take to mean both form and content, will both show what is possible to achieve in terms of directing a reader to the nonhuman world and will show what is not possible. A reader’s sense that something has happened which cannot be contained in the poem, or in language at all, will counterintuitively make the reader closer to the nonhuman world as we realize presence. A false claim of accurate mimesis would actually prevent the reader from realizing that the poem fails to contain the nonhuman world. This “originary” language, which hints at the world beyond the poem or indeed beyond the poet, seems to me to be a spatial rather than platial project.

In some ways, the postscript to Scigaj’s book is the most invigorating section of his work. Citing de Certeau watching a student rebellion at the Sorbonne, he comments on the way language is a site of resistance to social power structures; creating a “punctum” or hole in those power structures strips them of belief and prevents the system from continuing. This is the moment where Scigaj, who has firmly rejected poststructuralism throughout, suggests that

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16 Scigaj firmly believes in both “the integrity of the lived body of quotidian, prereflective experience as the basis for all thinking” (11) as well as that “nature must have its own voice, separate and at least equal to the voice of humans” (5). As a result, he uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to close the human/nonhuman gap, insisting that we can (and indeed must) have unconstructed experience. While it should be clear by now that this is not the side of the poststructuralist pillar I stand on, his basic sense that ecopoetry is what happens when mimesis’ failure is the subject of discussion seems to be one of the core tenets of ecopoetic thought, and something that Olson’s work shares.
perhaps poststructuralist ways of exploring language do have a place in ecopoetry, as ecopoets


can recognize language as a contested site, and then claim it as a site of resistance, thus altering


traditional power structures or identities: “In their activist mode, ecopoets capture a green speech
to contest both the environmental degradation caused by capitalism and the blinkered vision, the


restricted aestheticist use of language in texts, in the academy” (Scigaj 274-5). While I am a bit


skeptical of the capabilities of “green” environmentalist narratives, Scigaj’s key interest here


seems to be the idea of using language as a site of social change, as a way of simultaneously


shifting people’s attitudes and experiences via language play. Language use that changes who


has power, how we think of ourselves, and how we thus relate to the world is directly relatable to


Olson’s interest in myth.


For Olson, myth, work, and testing language seem to be bound up together. This shows


up as a dedication to ancient cultures, epic poetry, and work-based locations like Gloucester.


Olson’s emphasis on myth plays a significant role in rejecting mimesis. While some of Olson’s


celebration of myth and the cultures that produced them may have an unpleasant tinge of the


“noble savage” at first, what I believe Olson is getting at is a way of recognizing the construction


process that happens in not just single-person narratives, but in cultural building. Joshua Corey
describes Olson’s interest in myth as an evolution of Ezra Pound’s: in Pound’s pastoral, natural


images are inseparable from the myth in which they are embedded, and nature eventually


functioned as a sort of pastoral “ideogram” that celebrated his (fascist) heroes. After he was


jailed, “his natural images start to take on the ironic resonance, the confrontation with negativity,


that avant-pastoral demands….A new humility, acquired in part by detailed observation of


minute natural phenomena, helps Pound to grasp his situation as a tiny node in an immense


totality…but also helps him to situate that totality as itself contained and dwarfed by something
even larger” (Corey 117). This is the previous experience that Olson, both mentored by Pound and unhappy with Pound’s politics, inherited and sought to remake, both in the sense of what he was doing with myth, location, and poetics. “Charles Olson sought to adapt Pound’s technique to create a discursive structure capable of containing contradictory impulses and vectors that would collectively add up to a cognitive map of the postwar American space in which he finds himself” (118). *The Maximus Poems* are that avant-pastoral cognitive map that is both fully postmodern and yet engaged in a pastoral world.

While I still resist the pastoral emphasis here, I think that Corey’s suggestion that Olson’s use of myth is less totalizing and more of a way to get at the tension between humans and the world is useful in understanding why Olson was both so invested in older civilizations’ myths and why *The Maximus Poems* take on their epic, mythic character. In “Human Universe,” Olson describes the Mayans: “My assumption is, that these contemporary Maya are what they are because once there was a concept at work which kept attention so poised that (1) men were able to stay so interested in the expression and gesture of all creatures…that they invented a system of written record…” (Olson, *Human* 7). Again, Olson’s emphasis is on direct attention, not just to the object of the moment but to the processes and languages used to narrate experience. “O, they were hot for the world they lived in, these Maya, hot to get it down the way it was—the way it is, my fellow citizens” (15). It’s this attentive engagement with both world and self that Olson likes in these mythmaking cultures, and what he himself seeks to emulate through his poetry, and what he suggests by calling his readers “my fellow citizens” that we could and should all be doing.

Ralph Maud, in *Olson at the Harbor*, explains Olson’s interest in myth in terms of his archaic postmodern and how it can help us figure out what a human life should look like: “We have been taught how we are supposed to win, but in the great scheme of things (it has been noticed) we are
not winning. The supposedly civilized world needs to stop all the destructive ‘victories’ and find the basis for a different way, which goes back to what ‘Know Thyself’ meant at Delphi long before Socrates, and even before Homer” (Maud, *Harbor* 135). The sense of not just self and world as a dualism, but as self *versus* world, is not a productive stance, particularly given the more complicated way Olson sees humans in relation to the world. This is why Olson began studying Gilgamesh, the Sumerians, the Mayans, and other civilizations that existed before or outside of the traditional modes of European thought. As Maud explains, “since Western civilization has gone awry, we had better work with what we have from before the degradation. The Sumerian and Mayan are the ‘backdoors of our own culture’” (*Harbor* 136). Myth offers Olson a way to show us ourselves and to reconfigure our “sedimented language” without coming into conflict with postmodernism’s inevitable alienation.

Mythmaking, though, might seem to be a problem if one’s goal is engaged interaction with the world; how can actively inventing fictional narrative be a productive way of interacting with the world? While it’s a problem with several ways out, one in particular seems an interesting way of understanding what Olson is doing in light of his enjoyment of doubled awareness[^17]. In *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman*, Laura (Riding) Jackson, *and Charles Olson*, Carla Billitteri suggests that poets like Olson are engaged in a Cratylic process, or using the idea of a perfect language in which words have univocal meaning, despite the fact that they are familiar with linguistic theory that says that such a language is impossible. She says poets like Olson

[^17]: Corey discusses this doubleness, or “double knowledge,” in a variety of ways, beginning with human as body and yet not just body, and continuing to Gloucester’s dual identities as international/totally local or real place/imagined utopia. It works linguistically, too, as Corey discusses Olson’s choice to praise Herman Melville for refusing to “abuse object as symbol does by depreciating it in favor of subject” (120).
consciously took up linguistic projects that can be qualified as Cratylic as a way of articulating poetic and political visions of a more perfect society….they persevered in their utopian programs, attempting in their critical writings to reconcile modern ideas about the evolution of language, signifying relations, and the polyvocality of meaning to older beliefs in a language of natural meanings whose complete and faithful adherence to the things named guarantees a state of unchangeable referentiality. (Billitteri 4)

The sense that words can gesture at something outside themselves even though the words themselves are clearly incapable of direct mimesis seems to be an important part of Olson’s archaic postmodernity. By being aware of both myth and its accompanying absolute/natural language as false and at the same time using it as if it were accurately mimetic, poems using this language can “impart at least an inkling of higher awareness and more acute understanding of the real that a language of nature might produce—the unity of mind and world, the oneness of minds in society, that can only come with a perfect adequation of words and things” (Billitteri 15). I find this insight useful in terms of understanding Olson’s otherwise-paradoxical use of myth. I also find it useful for ecopoetic readings of Olson in light of Scigaj. The belief is that active, creative poetic engagement, even if it occurs in a strangely ideal language, will lead ecocritical readers to be attuned to the human linguistic construction and therefore the external nonhuman that exists outside our constructions of it. Olson’s readers will also feel the tension between constructed myth-reality and the external world and become hyperaware of the ways in which all constructions do this, are this, whether cultural myth or just individual narrative. The obvious construction/play of the myth heightens awareness of the moment where language fails by
pointing out that it never actually did offer accurate mimesis in the first place. By highlighting the myth, we are forced to realize the space that resists our construction.

All of these threads—active engagement with the world, reinvigorated originary language, and myth and the role it serves in human knowledge—come together in Olson’s Maximus poems. Maximus and his Gloucester are one of the lynchpins for people choosing to read Olson as a placemaker. While I think Corey’s jump to pastoralism, even a modified one, is too reliant on uncontested terms like “nature,” I agree with him that Maximus’ tale is not simple placemaking but a testing-ground for various ways of experiencing and representing the world: “Olson’s polis is a process in which separate totalities—the totality of individual experience, the totality of human life, and the totality of nature—contest and conflict with each other, without easy or false resolutions. This force field of conflicts can only be maintained without collapsing into one totality or another by the vigilance of individual perception” (Corey 123). It is this testing quality that makes him question mimesis, instead embrace constructs, and open the potential for awareness of unknowable space.

It’s fitting that Maximus’ story begins with “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You” (Olson, Maximus 1). The title alone here accomplishes a number of things: first, it suggests the epic arc of these poems by its formal introduction and its bold “here I am” claim. It identifies our narrator as tied specifically to a location, which both sets up a reader to pay special attention to issues of space/place and the nonhuman world and how they relate to our key figure as well as suggesting an archaic or mythological sensibility because of the origin-based naming pattern. This also makes me wonder whether the title references actual Gloucester or a metaphorical or idealized city. Finally, the casual, contemporary intimacy of “to You” is at strange odds with the archaic language, setting up the constant then/now, cultural/individual, “the reader”/me
personally tension of Olson’s work. Already, many of Olson’s characteristic elements are here: myth, the construction of the nonhuman world vs. the physical reality that always exists outside our constructions of it, and the variable in/capacity of language to describe. This last about language is particularly true given the high degree of compression, fragmentation, and parataxis in these poems. I think many English speakers are used to big-scale cultural myth coming in rather easily digestible language, such as fables or parables; by writing Maximus in “difficult” language, the artifice of myth is highlighted and the tension between language and the world is emphasized.

While this poem is indeed an introduction to Gloucester with its work-based fishing culture, this is also, as most of Olson’s poems are, a poem about writing poetry and how that work is like the work of fishing: practical and immediate yet universal. Maximus himself says that he, who is “a metal hot from boiling water, tell you / what is a lance” (3-4). Maximus is a new-forged thing, but also a practical thing; these poems aren’t merely art, but a harpoon, the quickest tool for stabbing to the heart of the matter. The mythic quality of Maximus draws our attention to the ways we process the world: by letting cultural myth like Maximus explain the world to us, we’re made aware of the degree to which these stories are just stories, highlighting the tension between language and world. He also will show us “who obeys the figures of / the present dance” (4-5), which seems both to promise a description of Gloucester as well as a historical stylistic analysis telling us who is in his own poetic stylistic lineage. As in “An Ode on Nativity,” this poem’s opening hints at the kind of historical/mythological narrative that makes us aware of location both as construct and, because we are so aware of the constructedness, we become aware of the space that lies outside our construction: the real objects and beings of a location we’ve called Gloucester.
As Maximus’ myth builds in sections 1 and 2, and literary/historical figures like saints, satyrs, and King Lear begin to people this poem, we also see very practical objects such as schooners, bells, or racks on which fish are dried as well as nonhuman creatures like fish and gulls—all set against a backdrop that always combines built with not-built: nest and cliff, boat and sea. The poem becomes a revision of the fragments T.S. Eliot shored against his ruin, but instead of a desert of fragments, Maximus is building a nest out of odd parts, or encouraging “you” to build a nest and consider the process:

feather to feather added
(and what is mineral, what
is curling hair, the string
you carry in your nervous beak, these (22-25)

The image of making a nest is not simple placemaking, though; this collection of things both innate (feather, hair) and built (string, mineral) that combine to make a nest is tied to other nests: a boat, the city of Gloucester itself. Even the materials in use are questioned: “what is mineral”? Rather than the built thing, both linguistically and in terms of content, the act of questioning and building is what is highlighted: “love is form, and cannot be without / important substance” (18-19). Repeating the projective verse idea that form, not content, is content, Maximus’ emphasis on building a nest out of spare bits is repeated throughout the poem, itself a nest of spare bits both found and made, brought together in paratactic clumps, in order to hold both Maximus and “you,” the reader, together in this interesting moment. The process of building as well as the image of the nest suggests at once both fragility (how does it hold together?) and security; being aware of one’s own constructs is the safest way to live within those constructs.

Section 3 of this poem differentiates between different kinds of building, different kinds of language; some is helpful, some is not. The preference in Maximus’ Gloucester is always on attentiveness to what is and the ability to deal with it:
the underpart is, though stemmed, uncertain
is, as sex is, as moneys are, facts!
facts, to be dealt with, as the sea is, the demand
that they be played by, that they only can be, that they must
be played by, said he coldly, the
ear! (35-38)

In this set of lines, how to deal with what is isn’t clear, and so the speaker says as best he can what is as he sees it, interrupting himself to correct or emphasize; I can almost see the speaker getting more and more excited, with building volume and emphasis on each word, until the final exclamation. The idea of improvisational response to the world suggests that the best acts of construction are those that happen in response to “facts,” which seems different than other people’s narratives. This section goes on to warn: “But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last, / that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen / when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?” (40-43).

There’s an anti-commercialism edge here, a distrust of capitalist narrative and a desire for the archaic postmodern where constructs are not attempts to manipulate others but attempts on each person’s part to situate themselves in regards to space, to construct narrative that highlights the artifice of language rather than sneakily attempting to conceal it. That I do the important work of constructing my own “nest” out of myself and the things I find in the world is necessary lest I find myself in a world where “even our bird, my roofs, / cannot be heard // when even you, when sound itself is neoned in?” (43-45). The idea seems to be that commercial narrative, by hiding its artifice and insisting it can offer mimesis, by selling us a false bill of goods will actually serve the purpose of disconnecting us further from the nonhuman world. If narrative is used problematically to disconnect us from our experience of the world, we will find ourselves like “a man slumped, / attentionless, / against pink shingles” (55-57). For Olson, loss of attention is not just tragic in itself but will prevent a person from having the capability to reconnect: it is only by
honoring our ability to see language’s failure and perform our own construction process that we really come to know ourselves in the world, both by limitation as well as by creation.

Section 3’s fear of being lost in falsely mimetic narrative is immediately answered by section 4’s description of how to write poetry by correctly processing perception of the world:

one loves only form,
and form only comes
into existence when
the thing is born

born of yourself, born
of hay and cotton struts,
of street-pickings, wharves, weeds
you carry in, my bird (58-65)

Echoing the earlier idea of built things in an unknown nonhuman, these lines reinforce Olson’s idea of humans as deliberate mythmakers as a way to live knowingly in the indescribable world. This poem is surely a projective verse: the poem moves from wherever the poet got things through the poem and to the reader, with the construction process highlighted: “one loves only form”. But the last line of this section, “of yourself, torn” (69) is interestingly suggestive of the way that narrative construction divides the narrator, a suggestion of the doubled awareness of body/not body that Corey loves in Olson. Language and narrative building tears humans in several ways: the division between what we can transmit in language and what we can’t, between the version of writer that becomes a poem’s speaker or poetic ego and the actual author who lies (usually considered dead) behind the poem, even between the way in which all humans’ awareness is a constant random sampling of environmental stimuli as recorded by a very unreliable memory process but it seems like our experiences are so coherent and complete. The idea that narrative is essentially a thing that tears or divides rather than makes complete is hugely important for spatial awareness and Olson’s work in general: what we write, what we make, as
much limits us as it gives us things. Mimesis, in attempting to give us “of a bone of a fish / of a straw, or will / of a color, of a bell” (66-68), attempting to give us something of the real world, gives us only “yourself, torn”. That the poem points out this fragmenting character of writing rather than claiming it is inclusive and holistic is what allows this poem to successfully gesture at the things that it does not contain. It is what puts this in spatial rather than platial ecopoetics.

The poem goes on in this vein, reminding us that “love is not easy” (70) and asking “how shall you strike, / o swordsman…when, last night, your aim / was mu-sick, mu-sick, mu-sick” (77-80)? Answering with fishermen doing their fisherman tasks, he ends by telling us to “kill kill kill kill kill / those / who advertise you / out)” (94-97). The violent images here are a fierce protection of autonomy, of the need to make one’s own constructs and refuse other people’s narrative intervention, with its sickeningly false mimesis (“mu-sick”).

The poem ends by returning to the image of nest-building that is also ship-building and world-building, conflating again bird/reader/Maximus as a figure making constructs in order to process the surrounding world. And this is the only possible way of successfully being in the world without succumbing to false mimesis: “the form / that which you make, what holds, which is / the law of object, strut after strut, what you are, what you must be, what” (99-101). Attentiveness, rejection of simple mimesis in favor of built construct, is the thing that will create a desirable, knowledgeable relationship with the world. Maximus, talking to the bird/reader, brings a feather to use in constructing a nest/poem/world:

in the afternoon delivered you
a jewel,
it flashing more than a wing,
than any old romantic thing,
than memory, than place,
than anything other than that which you carry (109-112)
The feather, the jewel, this poem which demonstrates the process, is for me the reader to use to build my own nest. Rather than being productive for me because it offered me a questionably-mimetic place of Gloucester and trying to bind me to my world that way, this poem built a myth about Gloucester and invited me to consider the ways in which myth both creates and limits place, thus indicating spatial location. The poem also includes advice about how I should understand the world to myself and what role narrative plays in that, which makes sure that I’m considering both narratives I write about my own locations as well as consistently evaluating whether Maximus is a reliable narrator or whether any narrative can be reliable, regardless of who it comes from. By so consistently pointing out the limitations of this construct, seemingly paradoxically, Maximus’ Gloucester allows me to recognize space without artificially colonizing it. Even the last line above is reflexively apprehensive: this way of thinking about poetry and experience is more valuable than any specific thing I might have: the method, the form, is more valuable than the content. And since form is, for Olson, dependent on time and location, even form will change—only the method remains, more valuable than anything else, including anything I will construct (“than that which you / can do!”). This seems congruent with Olson’s sense that myth, rather than leaving us in a fantasy tale, will show us the capabilities and failures of language, showing us where construct ends and space begins. To save length, I will not go into more of Maximus here, but this tension between place and space, between construct and unknowable, exists throughout the Maximus poems. Sometimes one is more emphasized than another, but overall, this cautious, antimimetic mythmaking is the guide that prevents both Maximus himself and his readers from becoming lost in a falsely reassuring dream of place.
What Thing?: Olson and Environment-As-Question

One of the things in particular that I think Olson’s work does is lay ground for a way of talking about the world that avoids what Timothy Morton calls “ecomimesis.” Ecomimesis is a form of writing usually offered by either “nature” or activist writing, is coercive, and seeks to close the gap between human and nonhuman in exactly the way that Olson seeks to avoid. Instead, Timothy Morton offers a view of environment not as known thing but as question, and this version of the nonhuman world is deeply resonant with Olson’s constructions. While certainly these concepts are not in Olson’s vocabulary, and at times his tendency to mythologize can work to perform ecomimesis, I think that the project taken as a whole is an important step in recognizing ecomimesis’ limitations on writer, reader, and world. As a result, I think Olson’s poems can both offer insight on how to transition from wholesale ecomimetic poetry to a poetry where environment is always spatially under question.

As per the title of his book, the key concept that Morton wants his readers to absorb is the idea of a world without “nature”—that mystical thing that is neither the focused-on foreground of any piece of writing nor the unconsidered background that escapes our attention, but a sort of magical intangible that we are supposed to be able to connect to that lies behind our specific foregrounded experiences. “Nature” is created via ecomimesis, a series of rhetorical devices which he calls ambient poetics that allow writers to convince readers to believe that something other than background and foreground exists. However, these poetics do not hold up under examination of the way humans actually experience the world; foreground is always a visible specific thing and background is always outside my sensory experience. It is only ecomimesis which, through clever rhetorical construction, creates “nature” and convinces its readers to

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18 For more a more thorough discussion of Morton’s rejection of “nature” than is presented here, see Ch. 1.
believe in it. But under closer examination, nature breaks down under our own inability to define it or point to it:

In sum, one of the principal complaints against establishing a vivid, solidly real nature ‘out there’ or ‘over there’ is that it just fails to be convincing. This lack of believability penetrates to the very core of ecomimesis, the most potent rhetorical device for establishing a sense of nature. The inherent instability of language, and of the human and nonhuman worlds, ensure that ecomimesis fails to deliver.

(Morton 77-78)

The more we attempt to describe the nonhuman world through ecomimesis, Morton says, the more we demonstrate our own inner selves (30); even acknowledging that difficulty and then trying to write around or through or despite it will leave us with only ourselves. For example, in trying to avoid writing nature, we cannot simply indicate background—it becomes foreground when we discuss it. Nor can we write about environment by making a list of everything in a certain place; Morton points out that such a list is impossible because something will necessarily be left out. Because of this, he says, location or environment is more a question than an explicit answer: “Environment is the ‘what-is-it?’, the objectified version of our question….In sum, environment is theory—theory not as an answer to a question or as instruction manual (what is the theory behind that dishwasher?) but as question, and question mark, as in question, questioning-ness. The best environmental art is deconstructed from the inside” (Morton 175).

By suggesting that environment is not a series of things or a mystical sense of being, but rather an ongoing question that defines our relationship with the nonhuman, Morton is opening up a way of understanding ourselves that seems congruent with human perception and identity as well as useful for understanding the nonhuman. Morton’s unanswerable “what is it?” question is
antithetical to ecomimesis, which reassures us that it can tell us a whole truth. Environment-as-question seems to be to be primarily a spatial relationship to the nonhuman world, particularly as the goal of the question is not a concrete, singular answer but to live inside the question, knowing that the question cannot be answered.

It is in this sense that Olson seems to begin to be useful. As discussed, Olson rejects mimetic certainty in favor of heightened attention on process and its constructs. This is congruent with Morton’s rejection of ecomimetic “nature” in favor of questioningness. While Olson certainly does not engage in environment-as-question with the thoroughness Morton suggests, his interest in investigating locations and self-in-locations certainly seems a useful start toward such a poetics. One such example seems to me to be “The Thing Was Moving” (Olson, Norton 4-5). The poem begins with a question: what thing? It will continue in that vein, as the poem is overtly about a landscape that the speaker grew up in and which has been changed over time by various human and nonhuman events, forcing the speaker to constantly reinvestigate. The poem shows a very projective-verse attentiveness and awareness of both subject and process; in this way it is very like “An Ode on Nativity” even though this poem seemingly is much more overtly about the landscape. While it is true that “The Thing Was Moving” takes the form of a giant list of events, I think it escapes being ecomimetic list because the speaker always knows that he is constructing a view of the world and that things are escaping this poem. As Morton suggests it should, this list of things, taken in the form of a question, eventually leads to the larger “what is it?” question of non-ecomimetic environment.

“The Thing Was Moving” is itself an interestingly vague title that pulls questions out of the reader before the poem even starts, indicating where it will eventually go. The poem begins with the speaker’s own life in regards to this landscape:
I’d lie amongst them in the meadow near the house
which was later covered by a dump to make an athletic field
and the brook was gone to which we tried to speed our sleds
from the hill the house stood on and which the dump
was meant to join, the loss punctuated by the shooting
my father taught me with the rifle he gave me from the back porch (5-10)

Again here as earlier, the speaker is aware that he cannot see the landscape without his own
memories and ideas lying over the top of it; there is no way seeing through the human to find
space. The history (itself a human narrative framework) of the landscape is one of human
involvement: houses, a dump, a sledding area, an athletic field, the damming and filling-in of a
brook. The speaker’s personal experience is neither more nor less important than any of these
other interventions, and no one particular moment is privileged more than any other. The
process here is also highlighted; just as one event in the human history flows into another, so the
lines are enjambled and offer the reader no pause. Human story creates an endless sense of place.

The narrative continues to include events that are both farther away from the speaker’s
experience and yet are narratively connected:

as when we built the club-house of railroad ties
on the edge of another flat, the swamp where the man
and his horse and team went down in the quicksand, and we
did not know until after the cops had broken down the structure
and even later when the auto showrooms covered it, and piles
had to be driven… (33-38)

Here, events very distant in time are shown to overlap geographically, sketched in vague terms
that suggest the speaker is not overly familiar with the story. This indicates to the reader that
there is no way to accurately know a location thoroughly. For readers, the list becomes a
constant question: what was left out? This in turn makes me question what the language is
leaving out as I read, thus effectively reminding me of the failure of mimesis and thus the
constructed nature of our experience of the world within what would otherwise seem on the surface to be a basic placemaking poem.

The poem itself continues in this style until just before the end, when both the lines themselves shorten and the subject under consideration moves from the speaker’s questioning of this location to a much more inward-looking gesture.

as irregular as men are, and as multiple, the times we are
and our materials are so much more numerous
than any such thing as the heart’s flow
or the sun’s coming up, why (67-70)

In these lines, the speaker seems to become very self-conscious of the act of language, more so than earlier in the poem. The suggestion that we are irregular and multiple throws doubt on language’s accuracy. Time and “materials” are brought into question as being numerous and potentially as irregular as humans themselves; even things that seem so obvious like time passing, heartbeats and days following each other, are revealed as human constructions designed to navigate us through the world. Beyond these lines, the world becomes unknowable space:

what can anyone say about the world that doesn’t come from that person’s own self, own body?

man is man’s delight, and there is no backward except his, how far it goes, as far as any thing he’s made, dug up or lighted by a flare in some such cave as I never knew (71-74)

First, suggesting that we are our own delight is not just a flicker of a joke, but it’s also true in the very real sense that we can’t see anything but ourselves, and it’s not just vanity, but the human condition to be so limited. Olson’s use of archaeology suggests that his poem, too, is just a cave painting. The very idea of historicity is just a human construct and is not necessarily related to the nonhuman world—and yet that there is no way for us to understand our world except through constructions like the time and history that are brought up by the archaeological dig image. This
is a problem, yet the poem does not necessarily attempt to solve it, just to note that there is a separation between humans/human constructs and the nonhuman world. In the classic Olson move, he has rejected mimesis and embraced constructs in order to bring us paradoxically closer to the nonhuman world. This is itself in keeping with Morton, who asks that instead of trying to find oneness with nature, we hold ourselves separate from the environment and explore that separateness (142). By acknowledging his distance from the world, the speaker becomes effective at gesturing to the space that exists outside human constructions of the nonhuman.

“Environment as theory, as wonder, as doubt, does not achieve escape velocity form [sic] the earth, but, in fact, sinks down into it further than any wishful thinking, any naïve concept of interconnectedness could push us” (200). By admitting space, we achieve a more functional relationship with the nonhuman world.

Like all Olson poems, this one eventually becomes a poem about writing poetry, and here, he discusses the reasons why one might write this poem in particular and poetry in general. He says the landscape, in the form of a figwort,

provokes me
and I study
bract thallus involucre whorl
of all my life, of torus I am, holding
all I shall be, hungry
that it should never end, that my throat
which has no longer thymus and all that went with it
might speak forever the glory of
what it is to live, so bashful as man is
bare (78-86)

Echoing Maximus, the experience of being in the world draws a response out of us. We can’t just go through the world without a narrative, so one needs to be constructed. Rather than give up that to someone else, Olson’s poem as a whole and this section in particular suggest that the most productive response is to do as projective verse says, look inward, find what’s there, and
then begin building constructs. The aware act of construction resolves the feeling of being lost in the world, but also actively prevents ecomimetic placemaking. This poem is very aware that at the end, humans can talk only about human experience, but rather than ending in sadness or isolation or fear of space, the poem ends on a glorious sense of freedom. By creating this myth of landscape, and by being highly aware of that myth, the need to speak in the world can be met without closing the gap between human and nonhuman.

At first glance, Olson’s interest in history, location, and the epic would seem like more of a hindrance than a fertile beginning for an ecocritical reader interested in spatially-resonant poetics. The next gesture, as has been often enacted in Olson criticism, is to think of Olson as a placemaker who resituates humans in an otherwise hostile world. But as this chapter demonstrates, these are both readings of Olson that, while useful at the time, are not congruent with current ecopoetic theory. Instead, insights into place and space suggest that Olson can be read in a way that is much more nuanced. While it is true that Olson certainly is not deliberately writing environmental poetry, these poems are a starting point for tracing a postmodern, spatially-motivated poetry. Olson’s poetics, by deliberately rejecting mimesis in favor of awareness of poetic process, embraces human construct. That acceptance of human construct is able to allow him to explore himself and the world, creating an interesting site of place/space tension that rather than claiming the nonhuman or offering his readers a false ecomimesis, is able to gesture toward space. By deliberately and knowingly constructing myth-like narratives about who we are in the world, Olson shows us how we can both feel less alienated from the world around us and at the same time find greater fidelity to that world without colonizing or rendering that world exclusively subordinate to human needs.
CHAPTER THREE

POSTNATURAL WORLD: JAMES SCHUYLER’S ACCEPTANCE OF WHAT IS

“So much messing about, why not leave the world alone?” Schuyler’s “Hymn to Life” continues, answering the line above: “There would be no books, which is not to be borne. Willa Cather alone is worth / The price of admission to the horrors of civilization” (Schuyler, SP 151).

This is the ecopoetic dilemma: feeling compelled to describe the nonhuman, how can we do so without creating “horrors”? One potential answer is one of the hallmark characteristics of James Schuyler’s poetry: the partially-seen almost-there thing, in surroundings that are unworriedly unclear, and the poet who is very aware of his own failures and limitations to perceive, to write, and to understand. Rather than attempting to solve the problem of how to relate to the world by insisting that a clear connection exists, Schuyler’s poems accept the impossibility of accurately understanding and capturing the nonhuman world, thus opening up a huge possibility for spatial awareness and agency. Schuyler’s work builds on Olson’s deliberate, process-minded embrace of linguistic constructs and rejection of falsely mimetic assurances about the world. However, while Olson’s work still suggests that there is a correct action possible and a correct way to successfully write oneself into the world19, Schuyler’s work does not suggest that this is a desirable thing. Instead, Schuyler’s acceptance of the world the way it is and humans the way we are, in all their ambiguity and limitation, rejects traditional conceptions of nature versus not-

19 From Olson’s “Human Universe”: “And why art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact. And if man is once more to possess intent in his life, he has to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again” (10). This process would create correct culture that would engage humans with the world rather than distract them from it. Olson’s ultimate suggestion is that the Mayans could engage themselves in the world this way, and so could we, if we learned to be properly attentive to the world and to ourselves.
nature in favor of laying the groundwork for spatial thinking. His poetic style, by incorporating failure and limitation, neatly avoids ecomimesis as each speaker is always present and always aware of the failures of the nonhuman world such that the poems are about human inability more than the world. By avoiding ecomimesis, Schuyler’s work is able to gesture effectively toward a world that is not broken up into nature or not-nature, but that has become space. Under Schuyler’s hand, failure, ambiguity, and limitation become not troublesome problems but productive processes that free us from the responsibility of making truth or place. Schuyler’s astonishing gift to his readers is that his work teaches us to take comfort in the fallibility of human perception and thought, relieved that the world resists us and continues without us: grateful for space.

That Schuyler’s poems should involve trying to look at one thing (the world) while being blocked by another (the speaker’s own human being) seems particularly appropriate, given Schuyler’s personal concerns about being overshadowed by other poets. Mark Ford’s A Driftwood Altar, which offers an interesting version of Schuyler’s biography, explains that Schuyler’s early poems weren’t published in the Tibor de Nagy pamphlets like the rest of the New York School writers because Schuyler “suddenly lost faith in his poethood” and because he was beginning to blame O’Hara for “undermining his self-esteem” (166). While it is true that Schuyler was already dealing with some of the mental health issues that would characterize his whole life, including paranoia\(^\text{20}\), the comment has an interesting ring for critics. In terms of what

\(^{20}\) According to the chronology provided by Nathan Kernan, editor of The Diary of James Schuyler, Schuyler’s first significant institutionalization occurred a short time after first meeting O’Hara and John Ashbery. “Schuyler visited his friends Donald Windham and sandy Campbell in a manic and ecstatic state, claiming to have talked to the Virgin Mary who told him that Judgment Day was at hand. The next day Schuyler entered Bloomingdale mental hospital in White Plains, New York. Schuyler stayed in White Plains for several months. There, inspired by Frank O’Hara’s ‘Three-Penny Opera,’ Schuyler began writing his first poems, including ‘Salute’” (Kernan 283). Interestingly, while on the surface it might seem as if Schuyler was able to accomplish his work in spite of his mental illnesses and frequent institutionalizations, Michael Davidson argues in On the Outskirts of Form that these were Schuyler’s most productive times because the institution gave him both time and stability from which to write: “Other comments in
critics have done with him, this fear is perhaps just, for Ford goes on to define Schuyler by describing O’Hara, explaining that “O’Hara was, in many ways, everything Schuyler wasn’t: brash, prolific, confident, talkative, robust, always the centre of attention, and any number of people’s best friend” (166). David Lehman also deals with this tense relationship, suggesting in The Last Avant-Garde that it was after O’Hara’s death that Schuyler, now no longer feeling as if he were in someone else’s shadow, was able to truly come into his own as a poet (266). As soon as this is said, Lehman goes on to discuss Schuyler’s work in relation to O’Hara’s, as if O’Hara were the standard against which Schuyler should be evaluated: “Like O’Hara, Schuyler achieved a certain intimacy of tone, which, like a matinee idol’s steadfast gaze, flatters each reader into thinking that the poem was meant for his or her ears alone” (Lehman 267). This phrasing is interesting in the way it makes the reader think more about O’Hara’s love of the movies and poems such as “Ave Maria” or “Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)” than Schuyler’s own work, even though Schuyler is the ostensible subject of that sentence. Though I have no doubt that it is both unintentional and due to readers’ greater general familiarity with the rest of the New York writers, Schuyler is still measured in terms of adherence or deviance from the others’ projects, even in Schuyler-specific work, as in the introductory paragraph to Timothy Gray’s Schuyler chapter in Urban Pastoral: “We have seen traditional pastoral themes…make effective appearances in the verse of Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Barbara Guest. Still, the turbulent surface of their work confounds most nature lovers. Poet James Schuyler and painter Jane Freilicher deviate slightly from this trend” (100). While it may seem a small phrasing habit, it is

letters suggest that far from being a site of oppression and fear, the hospital provided a routine and sociality and, most important, regularization and monitoring of drug regimens. Some examples from Just the Thing, his selected letters, testify to the banality of illness” (180-81). From a health care worker’s perspective, this is hardly surprising; I worked as a nurse’s aide in long-term care facilities for several years, and the benefits of correctly administered medication, stable daily routines, and freedom from the need to “be normal” in front of family often have a hugely stabilizing effect on people, many of whom are able to resume or start complex hobbies or work as a result.
common, and it is significantly rarer that we are shown O’Hara or Ashbery, say, through the lens of another writer. In this way, reading Schuyler criticism can take on a strange sensation not unlike looking through one of Schuyler’s own windows, such as this one in “December”: “‘You didn’t visit the Alps?’ / ‘No, but I saw from the train they were black / and streaked with snow’” (Schuyler SP 12).

This experience of trying to see Schuyler through the rest of the New York School in general and O’Hara in particular has been an odd lesson strangely in keeping with Schuyler’s own aesthetic, which relies heavily on fluid or aggregate identity, imperfect or inaccurate perception, and an unwillingness to offer ecomimesis. While on their surface, it might seem that Schuyler’s poems, which work so carefully to explore the speaker’s experience in the world, are trying to make a daunting landscape familiar, these poems insist that the most perfect description is a fleshy recreation of uncertainty, limitation or failure, and visibly-in-process (in other words, visibly wrong) writing. Instead of offering the false promise of place-based ecomimesis, Schuyler’s poems become an important stage in the process of spatial poetics as they resist Timothy Morton’s ecomimetic ekphrasis in favor of acknowledging the gaps that exist between the writer, the writing, the reader, and the world. While Schuyler is certainly not yet dealing with a toxic world or the posthuman self, the qualities that make his poems seem both so elusive and yet so immediate are a nice set of tools that will allow later readers and writers to avoid “nature writing” pitfalls. These tools are what will allow later writers to fully engage spatial ecopoetics and Morton’s dark ecology.
Mo’ Pastoral, Mo’ Problems: Why Schuyler is Not the “Nature” New York Writer

One of the more popular ways to understand James Schuyler’s poetry is to read him as a pastoral poet: after all, his work is full of lawns, owls, flowers, and weather. In *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard, following Terry Gifford, describes the pastoral in several ways: “the specifically literary tradition, involving a retreat from the city to the countryside…any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban…and the pejorative sense in which ‘pastoral’ implies an idealisation of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship” (Garrard 33). A pastoral analysis, I think, suggests itself to critics both his because of his biography that involves leaving New York for brief or extended periods of time and the way in which he combines “natural” and urban images where the “natural” ones tend to be idealized in some way. This critical stance is fairly common. For example, in *Soul Says*, Helen Vendler describes the pastoral qualities of Schuyler’s work: they are “undramatic journals of daily life” (62) and are about “perception, reflection, and feeling” (62) as well as “leisure, the sexual life, the ‘trivial’…and retirement from the active life” (63). She traces his pastoral lineage through writers such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Whitman, concluding that “It is Schuyler’s long and honest investigation of how natural species speak to him, and in what human settings, that makes his work worth attention” (68). While he does not explicitly use the terms, Robert Thompson’s “James Schuyler’s ‘Spots of Time’” demonstrates Schuyler’s similarities to Wordsworth, whose vision of the pastoral lingers with us still.

Yet, in spite of his adhering mostly to surface and a continuous present, ‘spots of time,’ of a lower or subtler order than in Wordsworth, do occur in Schuyler’s poetry. They and several other Wordsworthian attributes in his work comprise a conundrum of tradition and innovation, for Schuyler utilizes an autobiographical
Romantic subject, believes in spontaneous composition, and loves nature; this he
does while sensible to the more avant-garde output of ‘experimental’ poets.
Whether or not the Wordsworthian poetic is passé or still potentially radical,
Schuyler plainly espouses and demonstrates his commitment to it more than to
any other. (Thompson 290)

Complete with this commitment, says Thompson\(^{21}\), is a Wordsworthian mistrust of both city and
“wilderness”; instead, both poets seem to prefer the pastoral middle-ground between the two as a
safe space to rest between brief forays in either direction.

The clearest and best thought out of the pastoral work on Schuyler is Timothy Gray’s
Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School. Gray accomplishes his work by
redefining pastoral to mean not necessarily a landscape, but a mindset, “the natural sensibilities
city writers secretly harbor” (Gray 2). Instead of literally retreating to the countryside, for Gray,
these city writers mentally brought the countryside mentality to New York. Gray describes
Schuyler’s project as “objective romanticism, the operative mode of his urban pastoral project”
(104). He explains that his early poems “fuse urban and rural atmospheres” (105) and his late
poems, written after he moved back to New York in the 1970s,

show Schuyler struggling to reacclimate himself to city living as he moved from
one run-down apartment to another. At other junctures, though, he seems
surprisingly resourceful, especially when he is writing. Subject to
impecuniousness, sloppiness, and fits of emotional imbalance, he finds
recompense in quickly sketched pastoral solutions, plotting the coordinates of his

\(^{21}\) It must be noted that Thompson’s version of Wordsworth is painted a bit too broadly and is rather over-simplified. However, his is one of the rare direct studies of Schuyler and nature/pastoralism, and as a result is important to examine here, despite quarrels Wordsworth scholars may wish to initiate.
‘inner geography’ against a harsher reality with subtle shifts of rural and urban imagery. (106)

It is because of his ability to flip between not literal geography of city and country, but the mindsets we associate with those landscapes, and to combine the two into new ways of understanding either landscape, that Gray says allows Schuyler to “[adapt] himself to New York as readily as snow changes to rain” (106).

All of these analyses are quite attractive on the surface and, were I interested in Schuyler purely for his own sake, they would be doing everything I could ask of them. However, as an ecocritic, I am concerned that these analyses focus less on actual physical landscapes so much as they do a mood or a mode. None of these analyses define the “nature” they discuss, and “landscape” refers more to the poet’s interiority than to actual geography. In thinking about the nonhuman that exists beyond our constructs, I find myself forced here to confront the unpleasant erasures of the pastoral, which, as Greg Garrard suggests, is an incredibly idealistic genre and one in which adversity, failure, harsh realities of life, etc. are all too often glossed over in the search for an idyllic or authentic setting, life, economy, or ideology. “No other trope is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, or so deeply problematic for environmentalism. With its roots in the classical period, pastoral has shown itself to be infinitely malleable for differing political ends, and potentially harmful in its tensions and evasions” (33) Garrard reminds us, asking us to consider what power is being leveraged in favor of whom, and what is being erased. In particular, these pastoral evaluations of Schuyler’s work are deeply anthropocentric; the goal of each analysis is not to discuss how Schuyler’s work can show us something about the nonhuman world or our relationship to it, but to discuss the poems’ search for human truth, or to show how
the nonhuman world can be made into a convenient set of exploitable signs that the writer can use to solve his personal emotional problems.

Gray’s text is both the most traditionally successful and the most ecocritically problematic, as it is the only pastoral analysis that makes overt claims about the poems’ ability to connect us to the literal, material landscape instead of keeping the discussion within intellectual boundaries: “members of the School were, at heart, nature writers. For all their experimental derring-do, they dug deep into the mysteries of environmental phenomena, allowing the wonders of nature to shape their appreciation of city life” (7). It is also the only one that directly links itself with environmental activism: “During my time in New York, various green ideas…have taken root, making urban planning more bucolic and environmentally friendly. I like to think that the poets of the New York School were there first, even if their experimental language hardly resembles the terminology we find in policy statements, Greenpeace leaflets, or Earth Day Dedications” (12). He ends by suggesting that “nature-writing anthologists and academic eco-critics” pay more attention to the school; while this is not the same as suggesting that he is doing ecocriticism, he is clearly offering himself for use in this field. Yet Gray’s work, for all its interesting analysis, is not really doing ecocritical work.

As suggested above, the “pastoral” of these analyses in general and Gray’s chapter in particular is more about the poet’s inner world than the external nonhuman. Gray cites Frederick Garber as noting that “The pastoral landscape is an ‘inner geography’ that may align the writer’s wish fulfillment, but it is always undercut by the reality principle of the civilization he can never fully forsake” (104), but I think it is almost the other way around in Gray’s analysis of Schuyler. In several poems in Gray’s analysis (“Afterward,” “Thinness,” “Thursday”), Schuyler writes about the city in the summer to soothe his feelings of loneliness, trying to talk himself into a
happier frame of mind. For example, Gray says that the goal of “Thursday” is to figure out what
to do on a lonely city day when everyone else has left; “as the poem continues, the forlorn poet
learns how to make do, initially by detailing the natural abundance other cosmopolitans tend to
rush by and eventually conceiving of a ‘fifth season,’ a way of looking at New York that is ‘his
secret’” (107). The goal of the poem, for Gray, is to explore and soothe Schuyler’s emotions,
and the eventual resolution is a secret idea of Schuyler’s—while perhaps containing landscape
elements, the goal here is to explore Schuyler. Gray’s analysis switches the material world for
Schuyler’s inner world in other ways, too. Recapitulating the idea of Schuyler as impressionist
painter, Gray explores the way the poems “February” and “Hudson Ferry” are impressionist
“paintings” that give us insight into Schuyler’s own worldviews, in particular his love of
“oppositional unions” or “marriages of atmosphere” (108). While Gray uses the weather in
“February” to suggest material world atmospheres, the argument eventually leads to atmosphere-
as-mood, as he gives us Schuyler’s thoughts on Rothko paintings, which contain this union of
oppositions in totally abstract form. “Frequently in his poems, an unexpected abstraction, of the
kind Rothko or Mitchell employed, comes to complicate his view of a natural scene, until he
realizes that abstraction is just another part of nature” (110). At this point, it is clear that the
“nature” under examination here is essentially human nature, and not the material nonhuman
world at all. In other words, the pastoral in Gray’s work is a great exploration of Schuyler, but
owes little to the physical nonhuman except as a series of specific objects or as an overall trope
or theme of “nature.” This gesture, nature as trope or theme or inner world, is the general theme
of non-ecocritical pastoral work, and is certainly true of Schuylerian pastoral analysis, which
tends to be harmless introspection at best and colonization of the world at worst.
However, in actually reading Schuyler’s poems, there’s little suggestion of this aggressive pastoral claiming. David Kaufmann, in “James Schuyler’s specimen days,” says “The term ‘pastoral’ gets dropped a lot in Schuyler criticism rather easily, even though we might want to be careful. Beyond the touch of the pathetic fallacy that one might read into Schuyler’s experiments with mood and weather, there are not a lot of pastoral conventions or much pastoral conventionalism (mock or otherwise) in Schuyler’s poetry” (Kaufmann). Particularly in the sense that the pastoral is a political ideology of idealized self in ideal anthropocentric landscape, I agree with Kaufmann. The true grace of Schuyler’s poems is his dedication to imperfect perception and awareness of the distance between the speaker and the world, which is very different than pastoral methodology. Where pastoralism is based on an idealized “nature,” Schuyler’s work is based on a world that no longer functions on exclusively “natural” tropes and ideologies. An example is “Hudson Ferry” (Schuyler SP 18), which offers a surprisingly non-pastoral look at the world. Schuyler gives out a bit of writerly advice: “you can’t talk about the weather,” he says, “it’s like saying my lady’s damask cheek” (lines 9-10). What makes this funny is that the stanza before consisted of a traditional-sounding description of buds and early flowers struggling against an icy April. An amusing, self-deflating, typically Schuyler joke, the poem also goes on to do something else that we expect of Schuyler: take what feels like an idle comment and make it a substantial, straightforward subject of the poem. Throughout this poem, Schuyler references expected writing tropes and thwarts them, often in ways that might seem to tell us less about what we’re supposedly seeing, but wind up telling us substantially more. Burning flats in New Jersey “like a flushed cheek” and smoke “trailing like hair” (12, 14), are suddenly not just mildly amusing but very funny as Schuyler does the thing he exhorts us not to do, sweetly revitalizing his own forbidden Shakespearean cliché by romanticizing New Jersey,
that most unromantic of places—particularly unpleasant, I imagine, when on fire. The poem continues in this way, challenging our conceptions about both things and language through jokes, such as the Statue of Liberty as “Miss Strong Arm, toting her torch” (25) and “at the rail a man who rests his hands // looks heroic: he works at night: going from or to? / I don’t know I hardly know why I’m on the river” (30-31). But the descriptions also do something interesting: by insisting that the usual way in which the world is described to us will never work, he strangely recaptures his ability to tell us what the world is like, even using the language he says won’t work. Though he insists “you can’t get at a sunset naming colors / the depth the change the charge deep out of deep” (16-17), by the end of the poem, he is able to describe City Hall as “silver like the magnolias in the moonlight” (35), a very traditional image.

The reason the last line seems fresh despite the countless times we’ve seen silver moonlight before is because the subject of the poem is not the ferry, nor Hudson Bay, but the speaker’s own experience of being on the bay: a record of thoughts both idle and not, of trying to see things and not being able to as he is caught up in his own interpretations: like the old pink elephant joke, having thought of damask cheeks, he suddenly can’t help seeing cheeks everywhere. Poetic cliché colors all our thoughts and lives between us and the world. Strangely, because he shows us that he can’t tell us what the world is like, he suddenly becomes eminently trustworthy, someone who we know will tell us something valid, even if it’s other than advertised by the title. Although the title suggests he’ll do a tidy bit of nature writing about a ferry ride on the Hudson Bay, the poem is far from the mimetic rhapsody we might expect from such a poem, particularly if we’ve read work like Gary Snyder’s “Piute Creek” recently.

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22 So much so that Robert Hass points out the frequency of its use, and perhaps its tiresome limitations, in “Spring Drawing 2”: “Suppose, before they said silver or moonlight or wet grass, each poet had to agree to be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on earth, / because they learned in arithmetic, during the long school days, that if there was anything left over, / you had to carry it” (140-141).
Schuyler’s work neatly sidesteps this gesture, avoiding “nature” poetry. Instead, he offers us a look at human perception and the way it denaturalizes landscape. This is an important move toward a postnatural poetics, where simple nature or pastoral tropes can no longer cope successfully and responsibly with our landscapes, either inner or outer.

“It’s just the thing”: Schuyler Accepts the Way Things Are

One thing Schuyler critics do agree on is Schuyler’s acceptance of the way things are. David Kaufmann describes this attribute of Schuyler’s work:

Schuyler famously writes that ‘[a]ll things are real / no one a symbol’ (Collected Poems, 125), and he actually means it. That said, Schuyler’s pursuit of daily reality leaves everything as it is. In this way, he seems the most complicit of poets, because he does not appear to offer any challenges to the world as it merely is. Schuyler never seems tempted by skepticism because his tenderness for detail will not allow him to stray from appearance.

This is not to say that Schuyler’s attention to what is leaves readers with flat poems. Instead, Schuyler’s work is almost universally self-reflexive, aware of the poem in process and the way in which language both enables and impedes effective constructions of the world. This impeding counterintuitively allows the poems to end with a sense of having interacted with something physical despite being fully aware that the thing under the reader’s consideration is just a poem, paper in a book. “A Stone Knife” (Schuyler, SP 74) shows off this reflexive sense of interaction between a person and the physical world through the process of accepting what is. The thank-you letter grounds the unseen knife in reality: this is an actual object embedded in actual people’s lives, not just a propped-up still life or etude. The letter begins:
What a pearl of a letter knife. It’s just the thing I needed, something to rest my eyes on (lines 2-5)

The phrase “it’s just the thing” is hugely celebratory this time; there is only one object that could serve the purpose and this is it. It’s a pearl, a rare jewel, valuable. The speaker finds the object restful because

it’s that of which I felt the lack but didn’t know of, of no real use and yet essential as a button box…(7-12)

Here, knife is a way of ordering the world. The clattering awkwardness of trying to name a thing that doesn’t exist is both incredibly expressive of the feeling it names, and sonically sets up the button box, which creates astonishing noise when shaken. The enjambment of button/box heightens the tension of “essential” and then releases it again; while a missing button can be a significant problem in the right circumstance, button boxes aren’t really necessary so much as convenient. A beautiful, rather than highly functional knife, could hardly be said to be essential either—but these things, like all art, do fill a longing and a need. A function of art is to interpret the world to us, and so the “essential” nature of the knife reflects back on the poem itself, both a utilitarian thank-you letter and a frivolous-but-beautiful ekphrastic poem that is going to tell us what the world is like.

Next comes a whole fleet of metaphorical descriptions of the knife: smoky woods, lakes, weeds, Edvard Munch, amber, axes, lakes, Shiva’s phallus, November. And after this huge metaphorical list:

it is just the thing to do what with? To
open letters? No, it is just the thing, an object… (32-37)

The metaphors, themselves interesting and usually what we think of as the actual content of a poem, are slammed to a halt: the knife is none of those things. It’s just an object, and the metaphors, while pretty and helpful, are in the way of the actual physical thing. But he also resists the idea that the knife is just the quickest way to get a mundane task done; knowing that it’s just an object does not negate the fact that it is beautiful and has value beyond the utilitarian.

Echoing “No ideas but in things,” Schuyler has made us aware that the knife is simultaneously our construct of it and the object that exists beyond our linguistic constructions of it, and we must live somehow within that paradox. This is one of the essential problems of ecocriticism: there is always a real external that we must be responsible to despite (or perhaps because of) all the cognitive, linguistic, etc. barriers between us. We cannot theorize the world away.

Fortunately, Schuyler’s poem offers us a potential solution; while he’s thinking about the knife, we can extrapolate the method to think about the world outside human constructions.

the surprise is that
the surprise, once
past, is always there:
which to enjoy is
not to consume. The un-
recapturable returns (39-44)

Often when caught in this problem of construct vs. real external reality, the temptation is to try to somehow condense the two, to find a holistic moment of oneness. Schuyler deftly avoids that solipsistic error by pointing out that to experience the world does not require consuming the world, nor should it somehow use it up. While the overt text here is to describe the repeatable and ever-new beauty of the knife and thus of poetry (like this poem about a knife), I think Schuyler’s poem offers ecocritical readers a point of view from which to experience the “un-
recapturable” world as well, without colonizing or claiming the nonhuman linguistically. The letter-writer threw a double handful of metaphors at the knife, rejected them all, and ended the poem with another new handful. So we can experience the world through our constructs as long as we, too, are willing to see that “it’s just the thing,” that while our constructs offer us pleasure and a way to navigate an otherwise impassable existence, they need to be not permanent labels but Post-It notes: easy come, easy go; the thing itself stays itself outside our constructions of it.

Two key components that allow Schuyler to maintain this devotion to the thing itself are attention to detail and unwillingness to overinterpret—while language itself is representational, Schuyler’s poems work hard to draw as little “deep meaning” out of their subjects as possible, all while foregrounding the poet’s own act of thinking about the subjects and therefore necessarily altering or becoming a barrier between the reader and the poem’s subject. This has the effect of making these poems more valuable in reporting the human relationship with the rest of the world. In “‘Building a nest out of torn up letters’: James Schuyler, trash, and the poetic collage,” Andrew Epstein says of Schuyler’s collage-style poems that “Rather than thinking of Schuyler in terms of transparency, immediacy, clarity, or realism, we should reconceive of him as a radical empiricist and materialist, deeply skeptical of transcendence, idealism, sentimentality, and mimesis, drawn to formal experimentation, self-reflexivity, and practices of collage and appropriation.” The traits Epstein highlights here, particularly skepticism and self-reflexivity, are the very traits that make Schuyler’s work so valuable for ecocritical readers seeking an alternative to the “nature” poem and its false reassurances of accurate mimesis and promises of transcendent unity with the nonhuman world.

So many of Schuyler’s poems could be read to this effect. “February,” an impressionistic and not-quite-right view of “The sun, I can’t see / making a bit of pink / I can’t quite see in the
blue. / The pink of five tulips” (Schuyler, SP 6) is a typical Schuyler gesture of offering and then reconsidering a perception, of suggesting that a thing might be a certain way. “Korean Mums” has a discussion of death via a dead owl, but the speaker’s reassurance that “now it’s gone, / a dream you just remember” and “I’ll / soon forget it: what / is there I have not forgot? / Or one day will forget” (SP 166-167) makes forgetfulness and the human tendency to use and then discard such events or objects not a tragedy, but a blessing, and one that does no injustice to the speaker, the owl, or the garden that is the backdrop for the scene. “I love / this garden in all its moods,” says the speaker, even as he admits he will forget “this garden, the breeze / in stillness, even / the words, Korean mums.” (SP 166-67). At the end of this poem, he releases the landscape from language, which has the effect of reminding readers of the way relationships

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23 This is in interesting contrast to traditionally elegiac animal poems which typically ask readers to remember animal death and use it to parallel, reflect on, or engage our sense of our own; typical poems require readers to remember the images of the dead creatures, often in such a way that refusal to look would make the reader feel guilty or ashamed. One good example is Richard Wilbur’s “The Death of a Toad” (1950), which first makes a joke by writing in very high diction about running over a toad with a lawnmower, and then becomes somber at the end as Death, now in the form of the toad, forces the poet’s attention: “Day dwindles, drowning, and at length is gone / In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear / To watch” (Ramazani, 2 196-97). The occasion of the toad’s death becomes a somber reflection on our own death, and we feel bad for laughing in the first stanza since, after all, the toad/Death is now watching us. This is essentially the same gesture made in Ted Hughes’ “Orf” (1979) though the speaker here deliberately kills a sick lamb which then lingers “Inside my head / In the radioactive space / From which the meteorite had removed his body” (570). William Stafford loves the haunting quality of animal death as a protest technique: “At the Bomb Testing Site” (1966) shows a lizard “watching the curve of a particular road / as if something might happen”; presciently, the lizard is “Ready for a change, the elbows waited. / The hands gripped hard on the desert” (84) asking readers to think about the now-dead lizard, so like the dead people that atomic weaponry killed. Stafford’s “Traveling Through the Dark” (1960) is about a pregnant deer that was killed by a car; to remove a road hazard, the speaker shoves the deer off the road: “I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—“ (84). We are left wondering about our own selfishness and violence and the death we cause. In W. S. Merwin’s “For a Coming Extinction” (1967), the speaker shows the extinction of gray whales, “Leaving behind it the future / Dead / And ours” (413), painting all death as human caused murder/suicide. In all cases, the animal death is vivid in front of us, the images are pointed and meant to linger, and the desired effect is to force the reader to remember long after and internalize the sharp experience of it. To forget death, these poems suggest, is to render the reader callous at best and immoral, cruel, a psychopath, less human than the dead animals at worst. All of these were published before The Morning of the Poem in 1980, and so this significant tradition of American poetry that anthropomorphizes animal death so heavily and demands that we remember is successfully undercut by Schuyler. “Korean Mums” does not cynically exploit the owl by making its death our own as the others do, instead responding to the owl as an owl. In an act of kindness, this poem never even shows us the dead owl, choosing to focus on forgetting rather than death itself. And finally, it reassures us that not only are we not horrible monsters if we prefer to forget, but that the forgetting is inevitable, and even universal—and in the end, no horror or guilt or fear remains, only a gentle absence. Though we are given room to think of our own deaths if we want, it is in the same soft mode of forgetfulness; the suggestion is that I am, like the speaker, free to forget “Korean Mums” if I need to.
between the human and nonhuman worlds are transient. Even his poem will eventually
disappear. And just as the ability to forget the creepy dead owl is welcome, so is the way in
which we cannot actually find any kind of metaphysical oneness with the landscape.

Often in Schuyler’s work, this work is done by heightening the reader’s awareness of the
difference between us/our language as compared to the thing the language names. This seems an
echo of David Gilcrest’s suggestion in *Greening the Lyre* that truly environmental poetry can and
should be “skeptical”:

> By emphasizing the essential distinction between things and our words for things,
a skeptical hermeneutic acknowledges the ontological autonomy of the
nonhuman. A skeptical hermeneutic thus encourages, to whatever extent
possible, an *awareness* of nonhuman entities unmediated by linguistic structure. I
would also argue that an environmental poetics informed by a skeptical
hermeneutics reinforces ecocentric values by recognizing that nonhuman entities
do not exist merely in their relation to human interpretive structures or as material
for poetic representation. (Gilcrest 133-34)

Paradoxically, awareness that our language is not mimetic helps us recognize the nonhuman as
an independent thing, and come to the belief that this is in fact a desirable human/nonhuman
relationship. The enjambed lines “an orange devours / the crusts of clouds and you” (lines 1-2)
open “In Earliest Morning” (Schuyler *SP* 56-57), a good example of poetry that generates this
kind of awareness. Not only sonically pretty as the shape of the O vowel evolves through the
lines from the back of the mouth to the front, “opening” the sound, this beginning already
suggests a world of ambiguity. Orange the color or the fruit? Which one is better able to devour
something? Are clouds the crust of morning itself, or just the outer edge of the clouds painted
orange that conceals their centers? And does “you” mean me personally, or someone else, or a vague poetic everyone? By setting up this simple but vivid opening with a lot of ambiguity, not only does the poem nicely capture the muzzy quality of first waking up, but establishes a very different relationship to the world than is perhaps usual for a poem about the beauty of dawn. It’s an interesting choice to cast the poem in second person; the effect both makes the poem more immediate as “I” do things, and also makes me very aware of what the poem is: language, ink in a book, someone else inventing this little story. Instead of offering me false mimesis the poem works hard to point out its own artifice.

The poem suggests that “your daily life / grown somewhat shabby, worn / but comfortable, like old jeans: at the least, / familiar” (4-7) is going to be ordinary and perhaps boring, but of course the familiar has just as much potential to be comforting and pleasurable as it does to be dull, and so he launches into a vivid sensory description of the morning. This has the effect of asking the reader to concentrate hard on that which we are most used to. Light plunges and enflames trees, a dog is purposeful—there’s an odd reassurance that the speaker knows what the light, the trees, the dog are thinking. Suddenly interrupting itself, the poem asks the question:

The day
offers so much, holds
so little or is it
simply you who
asking too much take
too little? (17-22)

There’s a heartbreaking disappointment inside this question: why are so many days unfulfilling? Is it because the days actually are empty? Or, as the question suggests, is it because “you”—the speaker, the reader?—have a host of fantasies about the way the world is, and when those fantasies are unmet, we take nothing of what actually is? This is a significant philosophical
statement about the way we should experience our lives; as Epstein says of Schuyler’s work,
“Schuyler loved the idea of the modern artist as a radical empiricist committed to objects drawn
from the immediate present, whose job is to gather things deemed sufficient in and of
themselves, not in need of being reimagined or transformed to be meaningful.” This poem is an
excellent example: a plea for us not to imagine fanciful reality and reject what is, but to embrace
what is, including our own limitations on our abilities to experience things:

…. It is
merely morning
so always marvelously
gratuitous and undemanding,
freighted with messages
and meaning: such
as, day
is different from the night
for some (22-30)

This is a great unexpected funny moment in what’s been a very serious poem to this point. But
it’s also a legitimate argument: even what we think of as the most basic true things about the
world we live in are constructs. By all means, use them—indeed, the poem launches back into
beautiful description of imaginary landscapes at this point—but realize what they are, that they
are human interpretation, and so the world’s not to be faulted if it fails to be your description of
it. Our disenchantment with the world is often our own problem and the result of our own
human nature. This is a very gentle, Schuylerian lesson; as soon as we’ve absorbed it he lets us
think pleasant thoughts about how nice it is to scramble an egg, a pleasing reward perhaps for
our work.

The poem continues to work on what human perception and thought are like and why:

something rises
in it, a thought
perhaps, like a tree when it
is just two green
crumpled bits of tape
secured to grit; a
memory— (46-51)

There’s a clever bait-and-switch of enjambment here, suggesting that the sight of a tree produces a thought which echoes the tree’s growth process, and thus humans are like the rest of the world, almost an Emersonian sublime\(^\text{24}\). The poem then switches abruptly and we see two thrown-out pieces of tape on grit, which is about as far from a sublime “nature” image as you can get. The play here between manufactured and not, big and little, things seen and things remembered suggests the blurry associative quality of memory that is our only device for interpreting our sensory input. This really deromanticizes not only human thoughts but also the way we look at the nonhuman world, particularly as a few lines later we see a cherry tree, and realize that this whole thought process might just be caused by glimpsing something out the window. Our thoughts and experiences are as much just an aggregate of some things that happened as any overt narrative.

A demonstration of the way that thought is not entirely under our control continues as the poem continues to say “…fruit; / a face, a name / without a face, / water with a name” (55-59). It’s as much sound and association by cliché as anything else that drives those lines. However, rather than being just a throwaway idea, the poem realizes that the way language creates what is, as water—just a substance—is divided into a sea, a lake that is also a town that is also a village, a

\(^{24}\) Emerson’s sense of the sublime process in “Nature”: “When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the woodcutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet” (Emerson 183). Emerson’s argument in the essay is that sublime beauty is thus created by a “harmony” (185) of landscape and poet-view. Instead of Emerson’s big-picture ascent to the sublime, Schuyler’s poem amusingly and probably accurately suggests that the effect of seeing a natural landscape is mostly to make us think about ourselves—what this Schuyler poem might call the “sediment / in your mind” (lines 43-44).
process, and finally a “flash of / good humor” (63-64), which is a urine joke. But thinking about the possibilities of water, how we label and sort our world, how we name things and think we know them, brings the poem back to its original subject, the morning. Gilcrest has said that “the horizon of unmediated perception also marks the horizon of poetry” (131), something “In Earliest Morning” and Schuyler’s work overall seems deeply attuned to, as the poem ends not with a Muir-style ascent to pure nature as we might expect, but with the speaker returning to the written, human world: “the sun / dims its light / behind a morning / Times of cloud” (61-64). The speaker of the poem is forced to start dealing with the exclusively human world of language and ideas and constructs, and looks away from the meditative landscape. The result is that readers realize how much this poem shows us of the nonhuman world and the way we interact with it despite the poem’s own insistence on our human linguistic limitations. The poem returns over and over to things that actually are: the metaphors that we are required to use to make sense of our sensory experiences. By distinguishing between daydream diversions and the actual, and accepting both the peculiarities of his own thought process and whatever happens to be, the poem is able to show where the untouchable space outside our constructs of it begin and where

25 A common ecomimetic pattern in Muir’s writing emerges in My First Summer in the Sierra, where a walk through a landscape begins with descriptions of the landscape, then a comment about a sense of selflessness or disembodiment, followed by a vivid ecomimetic ascent to some type of Nature transcendence. For example, the July 27 section of “Chapter VI” begins with a description of a day’s walk to Lake Tenaya, where “the rocks, the air, everything speaking with audible voice or silent” (86) works on Muir until “On I sauntered in freedom complete; body without weight as far as I was aware” (87). The long descriptions of the landscape blurs the distinction between human and nonhuman as “One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow-mountaineers” (87). Eventually, after more vivid description heavily dependent on the poetic sound of botanical names, Muir eventually focuses on trees, valuing their age, what he describes as their tenacity as individuals and as a group that maintains the landscape, and eventually imagines himself one of them: “Wish I could live, like these junipers, on sunshine and snow, and stand beside them on the shore of Lake Tenaya for a thousand years. How much I should see, and how delightful it would be! Everything in the mountains would find me and come to me, and everything from the heavens like light” (92). This transcendence is contrasted throughout with the unpleasantness of human experience, as in Muir’s disdain for Billy, the shepherd. This pattern—to reject physical humanity in favor of transcending to various forms of light and air, or in another sense, Nature—is typical of Muir’s ecomimesis, and is part of the legacy of “nature” writing that persists today and which Schuyler so consistently refuses.
the capacity of language to adequately narrate experience stops. This poem, in its words, asks almost nothing of the day and therefore reaps a bounty in return.

“too fierce and yet / not too much”: Schuyler and Ecomimetic Ekphrasis

According to Timothy Morton in Ecology Without Nature, one of the dominant functions of “nature” writing is to perform what he calls “ecomimetic ekphrasis”: “Nature writing tries to be ‘immediate’—to do without the processes of language and the artful construction of illusions. It wants to maintain the impression of directness. But this can only be a supreme illusion, ironically, in a world in which one can find Coke cans in Antarctica. The immediacy that nature writing values is itself as reified as a Coke can” (125). In other words, the goal of nature writing is to make the words disappear, so the reader feels as though she’s actually experiencing some sort of other location. But of course this is impossible, since what the reader is doing is in fact actually reading words. By using the tricks of Morton’s previously-defined ambient poetics, writers try to manipulate the reader into believing that some sort of concrete thing is being conveyed. Not only is this an impossible trick, but it has two other unfortunate flaws that make this sort of writing undesirable. First, it is often a rhetorical sleight-of-hand that works to convince not through actually being correct, but through attractiveness: “This writing attempts to generate a fantasy-environment that sits beside the steps of the writer’s argument, not so much illustrating them as providing a compelling yet inevitably consistent sequence of images that aesthetically reinforce that argument….The fantasy is an exemplum: the figurative adumbration of an argument” (129). Too often, problematic positions are sold through this anthropocentric pathos, and not through logic or correctness of science. The other problem is perhaps more
severe for Morton: rather than decreasing the distance between humans and the nonhuman, it widens the gap:

Ecomimesis aims to rupture the aesthetic distance, to break down the subject-object dualism, to convince us that we belong to this world. But the end result is to reinforce the aesthetic distance, the very dimension in which subject-object dualism persists. Since de-distancing has been reified, distance returns even more strongly, in surround-sound, with panoramic intensity. (Morton 135)

As I read, rather than being drawn to whatever my actual environment is, I invest more in the fantasy—and not only the specific fantasy-world that the text is offering me, but the very idea of textual fantasy worlds, and that by engaging ever more deeply in those fantasy worlds I will somehow be connected to the actual physical nonhuman around me. But of course, all it means is that I’ll be reading more and more, and ignoring what is. Morton is careful to point out that almost every text will offer weak ecomimesis, as every text needs a setting, and just being aware of the phenomenon while you read can work to counter that effect. But ecomimetically ekphrastic texts make this type of illusion-creation, and subsequent effect on the reader, as their deliberate goal, trying to sell their readers specific subject positions in the world, thus creating the problems above.

Though many of Schuyler’s poems are evocative of locations and indeed offer readers vivid sensory details, I believe they are able to avoid the problems of ecomimetic ekphrasis. The way in which Schuyler avoids pastoralizing his experience, his attention to what is, and his awareness of the linguistic gulf between humans and the nonhuman world all play roles in his ability to avoid ambient poetics and thus ecomimetic ekphrasis. Instead his poems, by pointing out what he can’t see, let the reader start to see the boundaries of what can’t be seen or captured:
space, or location that cannot be imbued with human meaning or culture. Because Schuyler is not disturbed by not being able to see or describe certain things, neither is the reader. Schuyler’s poems, by gesturing to space, make us comfortable with it in a way that has the potential to change our ideological stance toward the world from colonizing placemaking to spatial willingness to let be what is.

Although at first glance Schuyler’s long poems seem like placemaking, they become in fact huge collage-experiments that are both true to his overall acceptance of what is and resistant to ecomimetic ekphrasis or rhetorical appeals to beauty or nature. Epstein explains that this is typical of Schuyler’s work:

From beginning to end, Schuyler’s work is driven by a fascination with gathering, archiving, and juxtaposing disparate materials; a fondness for incorporating in art ‘real’ things and found verbal shards in all their stubborn materiality; the idea of creating a whole entity from incomplete fragments; and the challenge to illusionism or mimesis collage poses. (Epstein)

This is perhaps most visible in Schuyler’s long poems, many of which appear to contain ecomimetic moments or segments, but under the pressure of extended collage, these seemingly-mimetic moments break apart. “The Morning of the Poem” (Schuyler, SP 186-234) is one of the best examples. In its title and first few lines, this poem seems to promise an exploration of the morning, or even the day, on which the poem was written. As such, this long poem, written as one endless flowing sentence whose subject shifts rapidly, offers its readers a huge struggle to retain content and remember the day. But of course it is impossible, particularly on a first read-through, to remember everything the poem offers us despite its single-sentence formal imperative that we do so. The tension created by the desire to remember everything
simultaneously versus our limited capacity that quickly overloads is one of the major goals of the poem. As things begin to slip away from us in the reading of this poem, the poem becomes, like a day or like life itself, a very typically Schuylerian process where forgetting, blurring together events or images, not fully understanding, and losing things is neither ideal nor awful—it just is. And just as the title can also be read to indicate “the beginning of poetry,” or perhaps even a tutorial on what poetry is, this poem’s real work is to explore the roles of art, language, experience, and memory in creating each other. The format of the poem is thus an echo of and an expansion on many of the gestures in “In Earliest Morning” or “Korean Mums,” but the long format allows the poem to discuss many of these things in greater detail—and to discuss the role art plays in establishing our relationship with the rest of the world.

“The Morning of the Poem” opens with lines that create non-mimetic awareness in readers: “July 8 or July 9, the eighth surely, certainly / 1976 that I know / Awakening in western New York blurred…” (lines 1-3). Here the lines not only suggest the necessary orientation on awakening, but they show the way the speaker is talking himself into certainty with no external evidence—he doesn’t consult anything, just reassures himself that it was the eighth. Even the language: 8 versus eighth, surely moving to certainty, suggests that the way we name things is no sure way to pin the world down, that language itself is just an abstract set of tags pinned on unrelated things.

Right after establishing this type of serious uncertainty, Schuyler settles into one of the major pieces of work the poem will do: the role art (such as poems) plays in human life:

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 morning sopping dawn
 Globules face to my face, a beautiful face, not
 mine: Baudelaire’s skull:
 Force, fate, will, and, you being you: a
 painter, you drink
 Your Ovaltine and limb to the city roof, “to
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find a view,” and
I being whoever I am get out of bed holding
my cock and go to piss
Then to the kitchen to make coffee and toast (4-13)

This moment, the first of many references to poetry or painting, and Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal* in particular, begins a gestural pattern for this poem. When confronted with a big problem such as death or existential despair, the poem offers two artistic responses. While not directly grammatically connected, the paratactic setting of these three images next to each other suggests that the painter²⁶, confronted by love and thus death, goes deliberately in search of “a view” that he can transmute into something that will explain experience. The other view offered is the poet’s response: denying his “artist” identity, he just does what comes next, a pragmatic response. While there’s no overt suggestion that one choice is better than the other, and in fact the speaker seems to really admire the artist’s work as well as the artist himself, the fact that the poet-response is funny makes readers like it more, and the fact that we’re reading a poem rather than looking at a painting, and have been recommended another poem to read if we want it, makes us have faith in poetry, even if it is full of ambiguities and abrupt shifts. It also suggests what art is valuable in solving these problems: the art that accepts what is, regardless of what is. There’s no need to find a view; you have one already, whoever you are.

Shortly after this, the artist leaves the roof for the studio, leaving behind

The exhalation of Baudelaire’s image of
terror which is
Not terror but the artist’s (your) determination
to be strong
To see things as they are too fierce and yet
not too much: in
Western New York, why Baudelaire? In Chelsea,
why not? Smile,
July day. Why did Baudelaire wander in? (55-63)

²⁶ Darragh Park.
The existential idea that art’s goal is to see things as they are, with knowledge of our own state, and that this takes a deal of strength, encourages both acceptance of the world the way it is and the idea that art can help us deal with the world. The reflexive question about why Baudelaire shows up asks the reader to be very aware of the history of poetry and how literary lineage shapes the way a poem looks. But it’s also a clever way of undermining the idea he’s just brought up of the strong artist cutting a path through life’s onslaught by suggesting the accidental, opportunistic nature of art: why is the speaker thinking about Baudelaire right now? Who cares? Throw him in! After all, things are not too fierce; they are what we need, and anyway, human nature has failsafes built in: we fail, so we will be safe. As the poem becomes more and more of a collage, and thus the human experience that the poem is designed to capture and explore becomes more and more a type of accidental collage, we are encouraged to loosen our death grip on the idea that we control our own existence, our own thoughts, and so on. Instead, accidents of chance, forgetfulness, and so on stop seeming like problems to be avoided and start seeming like the very strength of the artist that the speaker is celebrating. This, perhaps, is why things are both too fierce and yet not too fierce: as much as we feel the heavy weight of things, we are also spared the need to carry them forever, just as readers cannot carry everything in this poem simultaneously. So be with it for a minute, then move on as you must do and are mercifully able to do. In many ways, then, this poem is a piece of art that recreates an ambiguous span of time in July for one person. It functions almost like a visual piece of collage does, successfully avoiding ecomimesis.

Two of the hallmarks of ecomimetic art are its surety that it can both accurately reproduce the sense of an environment and that it is so very controlled in its reproduction. Ecomimesis is a well-wrought urn that tries to look as though it’s miraculously grown its perfect
shape of its own accord. Morton explains that ecomimetic work tries hard to create a sense of something, such as nature, for the reader while it insists that the writer or speaker is not there. One of his examples of this is an embedded war journalist:

A magnetic field shimmers into view, an ambient impression of naturalness, a perceptual dimension incarnated like Merleau-Ponty’s “Flesh,” surrounding and sustaining the narrator and the reader. In the same way as the ‘embedded’ reporters in Iraq gave their audiences nothing but ambient descriptions (“I hear the sound of gunfire around me,”) the narrator promises the intersubjective force field, but delivers nothing but a list of perceptual events. If the fine writing is supposed to be a “touchstone” for the ecological…then in this quality it betrays itself. One touchstone is as good as another (one infrared shot of bullets flying is as good as another). (Morton 133)

While the “field” created here is war, not nature, the process is clear: by becoming a supposedly non-translating conduit for the sensory data, the journalist or writer is supposed to give direct access to the thing itself. The result, Morton says, is paradoxically to reinforce the aesthetic distance between the thing itself and the reader, creating a sort of strange “interactive passivity” (135). The more the reporter tells me what it’s like, the more I’m aware that I’m not there and don’t know what it’s like. Everything the reporter gives me, no matter how true it might be, becomes a wash of war cliché. The same is true of written ecomimesis: the more a writer gives me sensations of what it’s like and tries to disappear, the more I’m aware that I’m not there and haven’t had those sensory experiences. The more detailed the writing gets, the more I’m aware of the difference.
Rather than trying to bury the writer in a flood of sensory impressions and minimizing the controlling narration, Schuyler’s poem is always overtly an act of construction that relies on memory and poetic tradition as well as art theory and philosophy to interpret its day. The speaker is always clearly visible, and chance sensory information is always embedded in a specific well-trained person. The sensory experiences are visibly the result of choices determined by artistic training and beliefs about art and theory: Baudelaire first, then the bathroom. The result of such an overt interpretive process, both simply happening in front of us and itself the subject of discussion, means that the simple invisible ecomimetic conduit cannot happen: we are always highly aware of the mediating presence and the things that have been gestured at but not captured. Rather than a false sense of presentness that increases our aesthetic distance, this method of invoking the speaker through inaccuracy and limitation paradoxically creates a closer connection to both the speaker of and subjects of the poem, both art and space.

In a poem like “The Morning of the Poem,” which seems to be suggesting that a poetics of acceptance, of movement, of forgetfulness, and of association is the most fruitful kind of poetry, it seems only fair to ask what a poem actually is. After all, if acceptance of the moment is all poetry is, what separates a poem from, say, my Twitter account? This poem is hugely interested in poetry in a way that not only continues the work of reorienting us to a spatial experience of environment but to awareness of the abilities and limitations of language. This is not only ecocritically useful, but is a step toward the even more experimental poetry of the Language school.

One of the most cited passages in this poem is this one discussing the nature of poetry and language:
So many lousy poets
So few good ones
What’s the problem?
No innate love of
Words, no sense of
How the thing said
Is in the words, how
The words are themselves
The thing said: love

.....
The color in the petal
Is merely light
And that’s refraction:
A word, that’s the poem. (387-395, 398-401)

While it would be possible to either read this section as a confirmation of the idea that words are in fact concrete objects, as poets like Gertrude Stein have suggested, agreeing that ecomimesis is both possible and valid through the tangibility of word-objects27, I think that to do so is to ignore the way the lines are situated on the page and the image of poetry as refraction. The enjambment in this section works to break apart what otherwise might be a sugary sentiment, or a dusty complaint about the kids these days. Instead, the thing that is wrong with poets is they have no love of—what? Words offer no sense. How is the thing said? The words are themselves. The thing said “love.” The line-by-line reading offered by enjambment seems to question the ability of words to represent and pleads that we love just the thing itself and not our constructs of it, just as the grammatical reading would suggest that words do have the capacity to adequately represent. The tension between words-can-be and words-can’t-be is answered by the refraction

27 The desire of early ecopoetic critics to assert a literal physicality of words was a common gesture. In particular, John Elder, who did very early ecopoetic work, insisted that “Poetry derives from the living earth as surely as our human minds and bodies do” and “poetry itself can manifest the intricate, adaptive, and evolving balance of an ecosystem” (Bryson, Ecopoetry). Many critics, including Scigaj, use phenomenology, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to embody language and put it in physical relationship with the world. This is still a common gesture; Scott Knickerbocker, in his 2012 Ecopoetry, suggests that the “raw sound” of spoken language means that words’ connotations also have literal, tangible, physical presence in the world, and while words as typically used may be detached from the nonhuman, their dual nature as both sound and signifier means that clever poetry can reconnect us in a very literal way to the nonhuman world.
The experience of color is the perceptual interpretation our brains offer us after our eyes receive light of a certain wavelength, and the reason we receive light of that wavelength is a combination of the available wavelengths of light striking an object and the wavelengths that object itself both absorbs and reflects; in fact, we see the light that is reflected and not absorbed. The experience of color is related to, but is not actually, the thing itself, particularly since we get what cannot be made a part of the thing. That we label this experience “color” and then assign a particular color-name to the flower is yet another human interpretive layer on the experience. And yet, it is impossible to look at the flower and not have this experience, even if we’re not paying attention to it. The tensions in the enjamed lines accurately reflect the tension in our experience of the lived world, and suggest that we neither throw up our hands and say we cannot use language to understand the world (space) nor that we can somehow have perfect access to the thing itself (place). Schuyler’s poem seems happy to attend to both the unnameable thing and the playful language of the poem itself. Instead of choosing a side, this brief section of the poem just goes on to discuss through juxtaposition more flowerlike things, ready to live in the tension it has just uncovered.

The particularly difficult and particularly rewarding part of this is that writing that occurs inside this tension, and that restricts what we can see, unexpectedly brings us closer to the world. Timothy Morton calls the distance between humans and their language on one hand and the world that resists those things “the gap,” and suggests that to “Mind the Gap” (169) is a good thing (141-142). While I don’t think that Schuyler’s poem lives entirely in the gap—what or who can?—I think that it is deeply aware of this difference, and is constantly trying out different ways of relating self to idea to word to thing named to thing that doesn’t quite encompass the name. By being aware of these differences, as in the example above, the speaker gets closer to actually
describing the flower. By trying to figure out the difference between an idea and a poem, the speaker is closer to explaining who he is in relation to the world. When the July weather makes the speaker long for the summer colonies and this reminds him of his “dead best friend” (127), he thinks that maybe he should write a funeral poem:

A nosegay tossed on your coffin: but this is not
your poem, your poem I may
Never write, too much, though it is there and
needs only to be written down
And one day will and if it isn’t it doesn’t matter:
the truth, the absolute
Of feeling, of knowing what you know, that is
the poem, like
The house for sale buried in a luxuriance of
overgrown foundation planting (133-142)

In an echo of his thoughts on the artist and Baudelaire, the experience of his friend’s death is both too fierce and yet not, “too much / though it is there”. Another of the poem’s moments of tension between things that are not quite really opposites, this section is supposing some unexpected and interesting things about poetry, things that are more complicated than the idea that it might seem to be expressing—that poetry is absolute truth. First is the interesting assertion that this isn’t the friend’s poem—though it’s also not not the friend’s poem, since the friend is an inextricable part of it now. This ambiguity prepares us nicely the idea of detaching the idea of the poem, whatever it might be, from the poem as physically written or the act of writing; the words, it seems to say, are already there, and exist whether or not writing occurs. The speaker contradicts himself nicely, saying that the poem both will and may not be written, and it doesn’t matter either way because the poem is both “the truth, the absolute” and yet “feeling, knowing what you know.” The line break separates the concepts of absolute truth and emotion or hunch, yet the grammar makes them one thing. This suggests that the way we think

28 Fairfield Porter.
about knowing is perhaps more complicated than we usually believe. By bringing up objectivity vs. subjectivity, fact vs. emotion, and suggesting that “that is / the poem,” the speaker suggests that the nature of poetry, like this poem does throughout, is that a poem is something that can encompass many contradictory experiences or thoughts, and rather than having to resolve the tension between them, can simply exist inside it. And that we do exist inside it. And that this is the way we explain the world to ourselves, whether we’re making sense of a friend’s death or sorting into our experience the house across the street. This is another variation on accepting things the way they are: not only physical objects, but experiences of the world. It is also another variation of learning to mind the gap, to pay overt attention to the differences between us and language and the world, and to include them in the way we think and talk and act. This work also nicely prefigures more experimental work that will continue asking these questions, such as the work of the Language school.

What “The Morning of the Poem” best demonstrates is that perhaps Schuyler’s greatest poetic gift, and gift to us, is the ability to be absolutely precise about imprecision, to recreate in phenomenally exquisite detail his own inability to really show us what things are like.

For all his interest in descriptive exactitude, Schuyler continually finds himself crashing into the limitations of language and the impossibility of representational fidelity…. To some extent, Schuyler was simply uninterested in conventional ‘realism.’ In fact, he resisted the idea that his goal was transparent mimesis or accurate description in the first place: for instance, when an interviewer asked him “Is your aim to precisely render the realistic scene?” his blunt reply was “No, I hope not.” (Epstein)
The complexity and richness of this enormous collage is a frustrating pleasure, a lovely wash of experience. The goal, however, is not to render exactly, nor to require the reader to remember exactly, but to point out the impossibility of both. The result is unusual: most long poems ask the reader to remember as much as possible in the same way most novels do, but with a heightened emphasis on language. This poem, however, seems almost eager for us to use up our storage capacity and then, overloaded, let the images and thoughts begin to wash over us. Some we will understand, some not. We will forget, fail to associate, not quite remember what his point was. Even many readings of this poem, at least for me, only give me comfortable landmarks in a warmly blurry space, where I can’t quite recall exactly what’s there but I feel pretty good about it.

These moments are everywhere in the poem and they are often given to us in terms of being braced by something else, something that lets us see something in perfect detail yet know that it’s all just a dreamed-up gesture to get you to something else. An example is the great scene from lines 593 to about 655, which begins and ends with the idea of trying to describe the sensation of moving air. There is a handsome, gray-haired man like moving air at the grocery store, where the speaker is thinking about trying to pick him up with the line “Excuse / me, I’m sure that we have / Met: were you in the class of ’41?” (597-99). But he doesn’t ask, and the man just brushes on by. Talking to himself to cover the awkward moment, the speaker asks “What am I forgetting?” (617) and then goes on to think about how men his age only want much younger men: “I’d like to kick them / all” (623-24). He’s then suddenly confronted by a woman who in turn asks him “I know your face… aren’t / you…’ you’re / Right, dear, you sat in front of me in senior English / or was it chemistry / Or French” (626-31). Grabbing “a ton of milk” in his haste to leave her behind, he thinks “The man had vanished. What a great love / ours might have
been, doing / It on the golf course at 2 a.m.” (635-37). This is, of course, a very funny sequence of interactions as no one gets to talk to the person they want to talk to, and a sequence of pasts are fabricated or resurrected and integrated into the present, and everyone makes assumptions about everyone else. It is a bright collage, both of things seen at the store and of texts, as there are faint echoes of Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California.” After a final image of buying a mousetrap and not liking the way the mouse dies, the poem section ends by reminding us what it is all about: “This day, I want to / Send it to you, the sound of stirring air” (652-53). Suddenly we realize this whole sequence is really not about any of the things it’s about. Rather, it’s just this small thing, the sensation of moving air. The poem is both undercutting its own work by suggesting how unimportant it all is, particularly when a good chunk of the sequence was either a social lie or totally imagined, but that has the strange effect of making it all important, all useful. The poem begins to wash together, and as mimesis loosens, place becomes space that I am yet strangely attached to it, all the more so because I feel no pressure to integrate things perfectly or figure out what it “means.” It is merely a thing that I remember today and maybe not tomorrow, but something, even if it is just the sensation of moving air, will stay with me.

In fact, the entire large-scale poem makes this gesture: it begins and ends with waking up in East Aurora, thinking about needing to urinate and wanting to have tea and toast. In fact, it ends with a hilarious story about drinking too much Pernod and needing a bathroom and not being able to find one in time, resulting in an angry, drunken stomp through summer Paris with wet shorts. “But Pernod, Pernod is murder. I wish I had some now, but tea / and orange juice will have to do: / Tomorrow: New York: in blue, in green, in white, East Aurora / goodbye” (1801-04). If this were a traditional narrative poem, the whole poem would have taken place over a very short span of morning—the tea and orange juice from the breakfast mentioned on the
first page are not yet finished, and I don’t know that the artist has come down off the roof yet. But crammed inside that narrow window is an enormous quantity of things and times and people and locations, some of it probably real in some objective sense, some of it probably kind of likely, and some of it entirely made up either in the moment or after the fact. And at the end of the poem, language has collapsed into this perfectly precise, linguistically lush experience that is trying to do almost everything except offer the reader accurate mimesis, when we have remembered some things and forgotten the rest and whatever we took with us or didn’t is perfectly fine. The poem has never lied to me; at every point, including the title, it has told me that this is not “The Morning in East Aurora” or “My July Vacation” or anything like that—it is only “The Morning of the Poem,” knowing nothing but itself, this set of words that ultimately can be nothing but self-referential. And it is so vivid and charming and asks so little of me but gives me so much that I vastly prefer it, and in fact feel like I am aware that a world exists outside this poem in order to give rise to this poem. This is one of the richest gifts of the poem: it teaches us to live in a state of failure of representation, and in fact to prefer it to a state of (falsely) accurate mimesis or assured description. This poem is a vivid denial of ecomimetic ekphrasis, a long and lovely story about minding the gap. It is a poem that is sharply and cleverly conscious of the role art plays in mediating experience and awareness of environment, and is celebratory of human limitation instead of mournful. Though this poem is certainly not environmentalist and is environmental only in the sense that it has a variety of settings, it—like all of Schuyler’s work—is a clear member of the spatial ecopoetics lineage, connecting linguistic concerns with a revised sense of human relationships to a no-longer-exclusively natural world.
I am fortunate that one of my close colleagues also has the charming quality of being my literary opposite. A Hemingway scholar and a historian, he loves the realist prose I find dull when it’s harmless and contrived lies at its worst, and my favorite poems fill him with either theoretical or personal despair, depending on whether they’re pompously erudite or gloom-and-doomy. Writing this chapter has been great fun for me in this respect because he hates Schuyler’s work; all I have to do is mention what I’m working on to wind him up—or at least generate a sorrowful head shake for my wasted time. “He’s so whiny, so mopey,” he claims. “He never really does anything.” And from my friend’s realist perspective, that’s certainly true. Schuyler is a poet who sits still and lets the subject of his poems present themselves to him, which can certainly be understood as extremely passive. For all his intricate love of location, event, and even plants, Schuyler can’t give my friend anything like the concrete, tactile, “real” environment and pleasure of “The Big Two-Hearted River,” a text he once held up in comparison to what he scorns—with humor because he likes me, but with seriousness because he really does seem to find these texts problematic—as my postmodernist tastes. I’m not sure how he experiences this argument, though it’s probably a good sign that we’re still friends. But for me it seems like perfect play, frivolous and happy. Even though it too seemingly never really does anything as we walk down the path once again, it reinforces the Schuylerian aesthetic for me. I walk away from this discussion each time grateful that I’m the one taking Schuyler home—Schuyler, whose work can offer bright flashes of precise realist depictions of landscape, either urban or rural, but who will also never suggest that he can give me some sort of pristine, unfiltered view of the Real Thing. The way in which the poems’ collage style and acceptance of

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29 When I asked him for his permission to publicly say that he hates Schuyler, he laughed, pointed out that I’m painting us both in really broad, black-and-white strokes, and said that he certainly doesn’t dislike all postmodernism or the New York school in general. He just doesn’t like Schuyler’s work, and it is more personal distaste than theoretical. He also said that he loves this idea and told me that I should use it anyway.
what is do not really distinguish between urban or rural spaces is productive for writers and readers looking to move from a natural aesthetic into a postnatural one. Schuyler’s ambiguity and the reassurance he takes in what most consider the failures of human nature provide a surprisingly robust framework for reorienting the human relationship to the nonhuman away from placemaking and toward spatial awareness. And Schuyler’s awareness of the way in which language and art cannot offer mimesis, but can nevertheless be effective describers and mediators between humans and the nonhuman world, create a poetics and a view of the human/nonhuman relationship that is an important technical step in creating a contemporary body of ecopoetry. While it may be true for my friend that Schuyler doesn’t really do anything, for me, Schuyler’s work is incredibly productive, exactly as fierce as I want it to be. For all that he generates a lot of books, he is remarkably capable of touching the world without messing about, polishing each silver day just enough to remind us of what a day is, why we think so, and how, in that day, to accept both ourselves and the world.
“There’s no dogma out of / this predicament,” Lyn Hejinian’s *The Cell* suggests; “It might have turned up / out of anywhere / All the nameable causes of / my material” (Hejinian, *TC* 71). Already full of referents that don’t seem to refer to anything concrete and words that multiply signify in ways that obscure rather than clarify what is going on, this text, like many of Hejinian’s, only becomes more opaque as the reader continues. While this might initially seem to be a problem, the very opacity and ambiguity of Hejinian’s work might suggest that it could succeed where more straightforward or mainstream poetics has failed: at reconstructing not just our conceptions of the nonhuman world, but the other half of the human/nonhuman relationship: how we understand ourselves. Lyn Hejinian’s work with experimental poetics builds on the lineage of Charles Olson and James Schuyler. Olson’s postmodernism challenged language’s capacity to offer mimesis and instead embraced myth and history as ways to make deliberate constructions of the world and highlight the artifice of human construction practices—an artifice that shows up poetically as the techniques of projective verse. His awareness of construction processes prevented his work from becoming naïvely ecomimetic and instead allowed his readers to see the moment where language and culture stopped and unknowable space began. Schuyler’s worldview builds on Olson’s; not just aware of the failures of language, Schuyler deliberately incorporates failure and limitation directly into his work, allowing him to accept the world not as he might want it to be, but as it is—or at least as it seems to be to him, flawed human perception being what it is. This allows Schuyler to recognize and celebrate the gap between human and nonhuman. Failure, limitation, and acceptance also become formal techniques in Schuyler’s
work, which blurs landscapes of all types together into one consistent human experience of postnatural place, beyond which is a space that we are always aware of even as we do not have access. Having changed both language and the nonhuman world, the only thing left to change in the human/nonhuman relationship is the human, and this is what Hejinian’s work does so well. My Life teaches the reader a very different way of understanding another human in a spatial location. The Cell uses those same techniques of estrangement without the autobiography narrative, forcing the reader to become strange to him- or herself: posthuman identity. Having nonreferential identity with a more spatial than platial landscape is a traumatic experience. Rather than being counterproductive, this trauma can force readers into a heightened awareness of self as in environment-in-question, engaging humans spatially without leaving the option for placemaking and thus a return to safety. This experience teaches readers how to achieve Timothy Morton’s goal of replacing “nature” with dark ecology: increased solidarity with a toxic or dying world in a way that avoids colonizing or closing the gap between human and nonhuman.

My Life as the Creature: Hejinian’s Poetics of Strangeness

Before I really begin, I want to take a moment to deal with a potential objection to reading Language poetry ecocritically. In a brief gesture that was potentially troubling for this study, Timothy Morton has implied that Language-school poetry is too Romantic to be of much ecocritical use:

One can trace a poetic lineage from the Romantic period toward postmodernism and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Far from escaping Romanticism, contemporary art falls back into its gravitational field. As Peter Otto puts it, ‘It is
because we still belong to the era opened by Romanticism that our modernity continues to reinvent and reshape itself in Romanticism’s forms.’ Organicism values spontaneous generation. A poem could grow like a cucumber, given the right conditions. And it values an exact fit of content and form. (Morton 190)

The implication is that, like Romantic poets; the Language school values “organicism” which is a trope he connects to false ecomimesis. His example of problematic Language poetry is Brenda Hillman’s “A Geology” which offers its readers California in geologic time and an addiction narrative and neither narrative is ascendant or dominant, and the narratives have few obvious sources: they are just mysteriously happening. When narrative emanates from nowhere but appears in front of us, it both perpetuates and yet negates the foreground/background distinction that Morton says is responsible for our idea that nature exists. The result is to confirm that something lives in the gap between foreground and background, thus reifying constructs like nature and creating all the associated problems.

Morton’s analysis seems to me to be a very limited view of Language poetry, particularly if his primary example is Brenda Hillman, who is certainly informed by but not a Language poet in the way of, say, Hejinian or Silliman. As for whether Language texts are a rehashing of older “organic” forms, I will say I do not tend to think of Hejinian’s text in these terms, since it is not inherently emulating anything other than a human’s experience and is not even particularly dependent on the animal-like qualities of the human body, which might bring it under the heading of what we usually think of when we see the word. But even readers who do think of Hejinian’s text as an example of organicism separate it from nature-emulating texts. Lisa Samuels, in an essay explaining My Life’s popularity as a representative Language school text, describes Hejinian’s “postmodern organicism” as
not the psychological variety of Romanticism, arising out of and seeking to inscribe a real-world moment. Nor is it the linguistic organicism of a modernist like Wallace Stevens, whose poems thread lyricism out from itself in a linear fashion. Hejinian’s organic form can be invaded and grown out at any point, as it is in the second edition….Again, we have the stability of a traceable form (growing ‘organically’ from the subject) balanced with the experimentalism of a new variety of form. (108)

While I resist the idea that any thought that springs from another without formal logic is somehow “organic” instead of just associative, I do agree with the way she distinguishes Hejinian’s form from Romantic organicism, and find it telling that even readers who find the concept of organicism useful see that this poem is distinct from others in the category.

Meanwhile, I find Morton’s choice to write off this entire body of Language work here surprising, particularly as he seems so interested in the ways in which ideology, underwritten by language’s own inherent structures, has a weird ability to create a thing (such as nature) out of nothing. And this tendency is something that Language poets in general, and Lyn Hejinian in particular, are certainly aware of. Hejinian’s work is not only profoundly non-ecomimetic, but it is extremely attentive to the ways in which we might use language in a way that does indeed mind the gap, particularly from an underexamined angle: though we are interested in the relationship between human and nonhuman, and are very ready to question the way language constructs the nonhuman, too rarely do we look at the way language constructs us.

Hejinian’s work is always suspicious of the way language makes our experience of the world, as it tells us both what the world is and what we are. As a result, Hejinian is interested in ways in which language can be an experience not of mimesis but of strangeness. At first overtly
choosing to become strange through a series of artificial formats, Hejinian’s poetics eventually becomes one where strangeness of both self and world are the only ethical, viable way to be. This emphasis on strangeness is a valuable stage in the spatial ecopoetics game: a self made strange is a necessary component to being able to accept the strangeness that is space, particularly if that space is itself toxic or degraded and thus inherently an experience that cannot easily be resolved by bringing that space into human context, as in traditional humanism or placemaking. By emphasizing strangeness of location, language, and self, Hejinian writes a poetics that is neither colonizing nor ecomimetic, and which is able to successfully explore both world and language without having to rely on nature constructs to do it.

Hejinian’s early poetics are defined in essays such as the 1984 “The Rejection of Closure,” which is an outgrowth of poetics such as Olson’s “Projective Verse.” Hejinian’s essay emphasizes a decentralized, difficult, participatory text that resists the hierarchy, commodification, authority and control, and invisible artifice of “closed” texts. While this essay certainly has sociopolitical ends, it also is beginning to construct Hejinian’s poetic stance toward the nonhuman world. She is deliberately interested in the way in which words are able—or not—to connect humans to the world around them: “Language discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than what language might say” (32). Language limits our understanding of the world in the sense that language is an ideological handle we attach to things to be able to pick them up, but language also has capabilities that we are unaware of at the time of our usage. She says we discover this dual limiting/uncovering effect of language as children, especially in puns, chants, or jokes that show that words are not equal to the world, or that create a gap of displacement, where the ambiguity gets resolved as amusement: “Did you wake up grumpy this morning? No, I let him sleep” (33). Anxiety and humor are related emotions; it is
the dreadful anxiety caused by the “gap” between our experience of the world and unknowable space, relieved by sudden understanding that allows us to forget the gap, that makes us laugh at such a pun. Laughter aside, the failure of language to describe lets us know where space is, lets us know where human stops and nonhuman space starts.

In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world—to close the gap between ourselves and things—and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so. Yet the incapacity of language to match the world permits us to distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other. The undifferentiated is one mass, the differentiated is multiple. The (unimaginable) complete text, the text that contains everything, would in fact be a closed text. It would be insufferable. (Hejinian, “Rejection” 38)

For Hejinian, the push/pull of being made highly aware that language is referential but not mimetic results in awareness of both our tendency to desire to somehow become one with the nonhuman world, and at the same time as we are made aware of this desire, we realize that the way in which language fails is not a thing to be mourned, but rather, in an almost Schuylerian gesture, a way for us to better understand ourselves. Almost in Morton’s own words, Hejinian here is pointing out the background (one mass of undifferentiated things to which we lack access) and the foreground (differentiated things we are aware of), and showing how the idea of conflating foreground and background is not only impossible, but highly undesirable. The “complete text” in which everything that existed was permanently foreground, permanently
under my attention simultaneously, would be an unimaginable sensory overload of hopeless sameness. So, just as for Schuyler it is good that we forget, it is good for Hejinian that language’s lack of mimesis exists in order to both show us who we are and prevent possibility for forever closing in our world. It seems, then, that even Hejinian’s relatively early self-defined poetics are already congruent with a type of worldview that would resist the rush for oneness, as Morton suggests is necessary.

*My Life* is certainly Hejinian’s best-known text. I’ve taught it repeatedly myself, as it has several traits that make it the ideal example of Language poetics. Linguistically, it has the interest in sound play, compression, opacity, and parataxis that is associated with most of the Language school work. It has a “mechanical” structure that both highlights the artifice of poetry and, in the case of Hejinian’s work, connects it more closely to its subject: 47 chapters of 47 lines each, which corresponds to the author’s age at the time of revision (an earlier version with fewer chapters exists, but the 47-section version is the one universally read). It makes heavy use of repetition to explore the way the same word or phrase can signify in radically different ways in a variety of contexts. It is suspicious of and seeks to undermine expected grammatical structures in such a way as to expose the basic assumptions about the world that we make as a result of grammar and syntax. And yet, though it does all these things, it is also astonishingly approachable: its sonic play makes the text feel good when read, particularly aloud. Its promise of autobiography is kept, though perhaps not in the way we might suspect, and all the actual materials of the poem are welcomingly familiar for readers who grew up in America. Finally, for readers who might be skittish of line breaks, the prose-poem format is able to offer poetic language while still looking familiar on the page. As a result, despite being just as “difficult” as we hope for Language poetry to be, this text is surprisingly approachable, sucking in readers and
implicating them in all the problems and questions of Language work before they know what is happening to them.

One of the most universal of these questions, explorations of the difference between our words for the world, and the world itself, comes very early in *My Life*, such as in the first section, “A pause, a rose, something on paper.” Shortly after the sentence “But a word is a bottomless pit” (Hejinian, *ML* 2), opening the idea that language can never be fully explicated, we see this:

Rubber bumpers on rubber cars. The resistance on sleeping to being asleep. In every country is a word which attempts the sound of cats, to match an inisolable portrait in the clouds to a din in the air. But the constant noise is not an omen of music to come. “Everything is a question of sleep,” says Cocteau, but he forgets the shark, which does not. Anxiety is vigilant. Perhaps even initially, even before one can talk, restlessness is already conventional, establishing the incoherent border which will later separate events from experience. Find a drawer that’s not filled up. (2-3)

This short segment, only a page and a half into the text, already explores some of Hejinian’s text’s major linguistic themes. Both before and after this excerpt, the text continues to juxtapose the ideas of sleep, language’s instability, anxiety, and our relationship to the world, creating a space between reader and world, minding the gap between human and space. Opening with an image of things that bounce off each other, we move to an image of dreams, perhaps, as a way of resisting nothingness even while asleep, or perhaps even just the human tendency to not want to sleep even if very tired. The next line makes us think about the way in which one event can be described an almost infinite number of ways, and perhaps even a foreign language class where we may have learned another culture’s animal sounds, highlighting the arbitrary nature of
language. Hejinian’s poem suggests that all language is as much an attempt to create mimesis as onomatopoetic cat-noise words. However, Hejinian’s poem is very aware of the difference between the world and our ideas, which she must even coin a new term to describe: “inisolable,” suggesting the degree to which all thoughts and all language are tied together, if only through juxtaposition. The next sentence seems to deny that it will all eventually work out nicely in the end. Noise now does not automatically mean music later. Another example of denying sleep is juxtaposed with anxiety, which leads to the idea that “restlessness” is with us even before language is, and it is this sense of restlessness that sometimes separates events (which we can and have described in language) from experience (sensory perception that resists language). This speculation on states that are indescribable while we are in them—sleep, being so young we haven’t yet learned language—heightens our awareness of the way language creates a gulf between us and the world. Of course, those states are impossible to recapture now, as we are all already full of language. The final challenge—find a drawer that’s not filled up—seems something I’m not likely to win: who doesn’t use every drawer s/he’s got? If you need more space, you need to get new drawers, which reminds me of her choice in this text to include words, like inisolable, that make sense but aren’t in the _Oxford English Dictionary_. All the images in this section seem to suggest that, despite being full of language, language fails to adequately represent the world, and the result for us is anxiety and heightened attention to those moments of and reasons for failure.

Sections like this, which associate images of language, world, anxiety, and failure to provide mimesis abound in this text. This happens in individual lines, such as “Language is restless” (Hejinian, ML 22), or “Language which is like a fruitskin around fruit” (58), which is a particularly striking image of the way language tries to contain the thing it describes, but is
ultimately detachable and not the actual thing it names. Another particularly interesting example that shows the way language is separate from the world is here:

The coffee drinkers answered ecstatically, pounding their cups on the table. How to separate people from principles. A healthy dialectic between poetry and prose. Good days go by fast, too fast. On the low rectangular coffee table was a rack for the postcard collection. A lot of questions, a few answers, the progress of questioning, the spot on the brain where these words will go. For example, I remember the blue coat with the red piping but I don’t remember myself in it….One thing beside another, or and then another, x times y, x dividing y, x plus you. A word is only introduced under very tight restrictions. Sun, therefore laundry. The little ripple shall find waves. Longevity—or velocity. (ML 88-89)

This section opens with one of the repeated lines, one which through repetition affirms a class of people, then asks how we can separate people from repeated ideas. Juxtaposed is the idea that poetry and prose are different, pointing out two of the variable functions language can have, asking us to figure out what the difference between those functions is (as we read this text that is both prose and poem). Skipping between immediate physical object and abstract ideas, the poem seeks to join the two by thinking about the process of questioning and thinking, down to the way thinking is a process of material brain. Perhaps because that is itself dissociative, we get the image of remembering a childhood thing without remembering oneself as a child, which is certainly a common experience, and one here that pulls identity into question. The section ends by questioning the thought process itself: do we link things because they are juxtaposed, as in this poem? But even simply putting two things next to each other means something specific, as it does in math: xy means multiply x by y. But only if you’re a mathematician. The passage
explains in terms of words: no matter how carefully you define a word, it will mean something else via association or juxtaposition: not everyone will move from sun to laundry, but this person does. Associations ripple out from anything, any event or word or image. The looseness of language means that, like the little girl in the coat or a fruit skin, to wrap something up in language is to make the thing described all the less visible. We can see the language, but the thing itself vanishes. It’s no wonder that she comments “The dictionary presents a world view, the bilingual dictionary presents a world view, the bilingual dictionary doubles that, presents two. Community is a fortress, we begin to foresee” (ML 111-12). A fixed vocabulary and grammar limits you to one worldview; it includes you, but it also precludes you from seeing out, and in some cases prevents you from communicating at all. “The things I was saying followed logically the things that I had said before, yet they bore no relation to what I was thinking and feeling” (ML 48). Here the speaker and the reader are caught between the requirements of language in order to be understandable—syntax, grammar, tense in narrative—and the way in which those requirements can restrict speech in such a way that the language can no longer communicate the real experience the speaker is having—instead, they just communicate themselves: syntax, grammar, tense. And of course the reader realizes this is true for all language and experiences: more than anything else, what language communicates is not the world, but itself.

This could all sound a bit dreary, were it not for the obvious pleasure and freedom the text takes in its free play, in the sense that it is better to be able to have this linguistic gap between self and the world. Repeated lines like “The greatest thrill was to be the one to tell” (ML 90, “Such displacements alter illusions, which is all-to-the-good” (ML 70), and “As for we
who ‘love to be astonished,’”\(^{30}\) (ML 10) suggest that the displacement, detachment, and so on that the text expresses is a pleasure, a good thing—or at the very least, not boring. While individual moments in this text certainly seem to be made of images that we would associate with unhappiness, such as the person who has cancer or the at-times contentious relationship between the speaker and the father, the overall emotion of the book is positive. And as readers, we begin to see how a life is formed by, despite, and through language. “I was eventually to become one person, gathered up maybe, during a pause, at a comma” (ML 33). Visually, this is an interesting sentence, full of commas in which we might be able to see the speaker. The commas become holes in a fence of words that we are trying to see through, or frames that allow us context for what we are seeing. By seeing language as both obstruction and window, the reader is able to see the anxiety produced by the problem of non-mimetic language loosen. Rather than becoming increasingly unhappy, we learn to live in a world in which language conceals as much as it shows, and where the concealing and the showing are “inisolable,” forcing readers to mind the gap between the self and the world.

Using language in such a way as to refuse simple narrative or self-description may seem like a strange gesture to make since My Life is—or at least seems to be performing some functions of—autobiography. This autobiography, however, works to redefine not just the genre but what a human is. Redefining the human is a crucial step not just in Hejinian’s overall poetics development, but towards a new relationship with the nonhuman world. In

\(^{30}\) This phrase has been used as representative of experimental writing, such as in the collection We Who Love to Be Astonished: Women’s Experimental Writing and Performance Poetics. However, last summer, similar phrasing showed up in in Galway Kinnell’s postconfessional-style, linguistically flat or stark, nature-image-heavy “Astonishment,” a Philip Larkin-like poem that, via Aeolian poetics, juxtaposes a mature and cooling relationship with the end of a summer’s day. The poem, contemplating the possible end of the relationship, closes with “Before us, our first task is to astonish, / and then, harder by far, to be astonished” (Kinnell 56). An interesting juxtaposition of two writers’ language styles and poetic goals aimed at the desire/willingness “to be astonished.”
“Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life;*” Juliana Spahr celebrates Hejinian’s challenge to a very traditional genre and the ways in which it changes not just biography or women’s writing but the very nature of reading in general. She begins by saying that despite the entire body of critical theory in general and feminist challenges asking what is excluded/erased in the word “self,” we still tend to think that autobiography “‘uncovers’ a visible and essentially legible self” (139). While several writers of *l’écriture feminine* have attempted texts that solve this problem, for Spahr, most of these simply become a game of who can come up with the greatest number of discrete identities, which fails to actually address the problem of stable self. Hejinian does succeed, however, through attacking not self but language:

The book forces a reader’s attention on the symbolic nature of reflection and the reader’s construction of this reflection—hence the book’s insistent concern with and discussion of language—not on the reflection itself….As a blind camera, Hejinian is always defining herself against her ‘self,’ switching the emphasis from a stable self to the constructed nature of self, to its language. (Spahr 144-45)

This switching is done by use of elusive pronouns that switch targets or completely fail to signify, repetitive but conflicting “I wanted to be” sentences, a rejection of absolute subject position, and so on. By focusing on the way in which language works, rather than coming up with many selves that make up one big identity, Hejinian is able to dissolve the sense of self entirely. One of the significant hurdles for first-time readers of *My Life* is learning to deal with a non-person, a non-identity. Particularly as genre has trained us well to expect a sense of connection through text, this refusal seems at first almost to be an affront. However, the eventual result of this dissolution is not increased alienation or hostility, but increased freedom.
This is a process that both reflects back to her readers and implicates them: “Instead of offering full multiple identities, My Life is a process-centered work that calls attention to the methods by which the autobiographical subject is constructed by both author and reader. Hejinian’s constant resignification of subjectivity confronts head-on the constructed reality of autobiography and the reader’s seduction by this construction” (147). Just as language fails to adequately represent the world, it fails to adequately represent the person whose life is being described, with the same results. As readers, we want to become one with the autobiographical subject, to feel like we have really established a closeness and an understanding. That the language also shows us the degree to which we are alienated from that person reflects back on us and our own descriptions of ourselves, an experience that is at once terrifying and liberating in the way it reshapes our relationships to the structures of power inherent in our language in our favor. In short, this is a text where authority is repeatedly undermined: first the authority of the writer, as the reader is forced to create meaning where there is neither obvious narrative nor clear narrator, and then the authority of language itself, as readers realize that all language, including that used to describe themselves, is equally limited and limiting. The agency created by this process is fairly significant: freed from the passive-audience mode of most autobiography, Hejinian’s readers are able to meet their own needs and desires with her text, and subsequently learn to do this with other textual worlds as well. This is where Spahr sees the potential for political agency in this work, though she is careful to say she is not sure how efficacious, direct, or what shape it will take: “The postmodern autobiography’s attention to providing a non-colonized space for its reader, as exemplified in My Life, encourages the individual to more fully exercise agency when encountering these totalitarian technologies” (Spahr 155). While the totalitarian technologies she specifically is indicating are things like advertising or the constant
barrage of media outlets that fill our lives with descriptions, an overall Language poetry theme is that language, itself a technology, can have a totalitarian effect in terms of its “standard” usage. And I agree with this stance that suggests language itself can have a colonizing effect on its target, and I think that colonization can apply to either a human or the nonhuman world. It seems clear that Hejinian’s text is a strong attempt to resist not only subject positions for both speaker and reader but the larger structures that tend to enforce a range of subject positions as the only viable options. This forces us to interact with nonidentity. I take nonidentity to mean not nonexistence or complete lack of any of the features of a person, but instead a lack of a stable sense of self. If identity is a consistent indicator of who a person is, nonidentity is the lack of that consistency. By presenting us with nonidentity, we are freed from the belief that the purpose of language is colonization and its correct use is to continually be colonize and colonize in turn.

Hejinian’s unusual nonidentity in My Life is an interesting version of a person, made of a series of juxtaposed events and situations. Alex Houen, in Powers of Possibility, constructs a lineage of poetics based on the way in which poems/bodies of work create a wide field of possibility for its readers, often with a rejection of closure or limitation, and often with inherent political action involved. Placing Hejinian in this category, he reflects that in My Life,

Identity here is provisional; contingent upon performing actions like naming or renunciation. If one founds oneself as a person by reflecting on oneself, that reflection involves making oneself both subject and object, first and third person, simultaneously: ‘I’, ‘myself’, ‘a woman’, ‘it’. The singularity of Hejinian’s

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31 One of Morton’s serious problems with the Romantic legacy is what he calls Romantic consumerism, where to consume a material thing is not merely to eat or use it, but to sign on for the subject position its consumption creates. Part of the problem of ekphrastic ecomimesis is that such a text works to sell a specific nature-based subject position. Texts that not only liberate their readers from specific forced subject positions but create reading habits that enable readers to reject this process even in less-open texts, as Spahr suggests of Hejinian’s text, seem a relevant potential tool for dealing with this problem, even if they do not tackle the problem of nature-based Romantic consumption directly.
person is thus predicated on being relational and under construction. That also
gives it an open performativity...which makes of personhood a series of
encounters. (Houen 206)

In some ways, this linguistic nonidentity is like children working in a giant Lego pit: a group
project with almost incalculable variations, dependent on both the material offered and the
interchangeable-but-specific kids present. He continues to emphasize the always-under-
construction quality of Hejinian’s work, and the way in which the continued construction does
not shut down possibilities, but rather expands the field of components available, creating what
he calls “open singularities”: specific instances that suggest the possibility of many more, and in
fact entice the reader to see what else they can assemble. Who wouldn’t want go to play in the
Lego pit?

While Houen goes on to analyze the politics inherent in such possibility and to push
forward farther into Hejinian’s work, I think his suggestion that identity is assembled and
reassembled from a huge field of parts is a useful way of thinking about the type of identity this
text is positing as a desirable way of understanding the world. The built human is a magnetic
idea/subject of study for any number of ecocritics, including Timothy Morton, who is fascinated
by Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, and particularly the relationships that both characters and
readers have with the creature. It begins with Morton’s desire for art to be neither totally
cynical, completely solipsistic, or evince the hand of a True Believer. Instead, he thinks that a
desirable worldview is an ironic one, in the dramatic or linguistic sense: “If art really did become
more like science, then irony would be less an aesthetic pose, a slogan on a T-shirt, and more of
a willingness to be wrong: to encounter nonidentity. Irony is the refreshing and consistent
noncoincidence of what is in our heads with what is the case” (Morton 193). Frankenstein’s
creature is a concrete example of nonidentity for Morton: though he is human—many humans, in fact anybody—he “is not even an other because he cannot return our gaze or act as blank screen. He is a horrific abject that speaks beautiful Enlightenment prose, a piece of butcher’s meat with blinking eyes” (194). Readers of *Frankenstein* face a huge challenge as they must deal with their own reactions to the creature, whose identity, like his body, is made of fragments of other identities, which cannot ever cohere into a solid, stable self. Morton’s point is that our reactions to the creature are a good bellwether for our reactions to the nonhuman world as a whole:

> Caring for the creature would acknowledge the monstrosity at the heart of the idea of nature….The augury of *Frankenstein* is the reverse of deep ecology. The task becomes to love the disgusting, inert, and meaningless. Ecological politics must constantly and ruthlessly reframe our view of the ecological: what was ‘outside’ yesterday must be ‘inside’ today. We identify with the monstrous thing. We ourselves are ‘tackily’ made of bits and pieces of stuff. The most ethical act is to love the other precisely in their artificiality, rather than seeking to prove their naturalness and authenticity. Deep ecology ironically does not respect the natural world as actual contingent beings, but as standing in for an idea of the natural. Deep ecology goes to extremes on this point, insisting that humans are a viral supplement to an organic whole. Dark ecology, by contrast, is a perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form. (195)

While the most common responses to the creature might be Victor’s own (reject the very idea and fall into a brain fever for weeks, homicidally chase it across the world, etc.), Morton is arguing that the most useful, most productive response is not to attempt to make identity out of nonidentity, thus killing it. The best response is to accept nonidentity as a valid form of being,
even if that is an unending process that results in neither comfort nor stability. After all, Morton asks, who among us actually has stable identity instead of being made up of various bits and pieces of things? Insofar as space is the thing that resists knowing and with which we cannot interfere without rendering it place, learning to love the creature and recognize our own creaturely qualities becomes a significant spatial exercise. “In this respect, dark ecology diverges from those romanticisms that follow a Hegelian dialectic, the story of the reconciliation of the self to the other, who turns out to be the self in disguise. It gets over the dilemma of the beautiful soul, not by turning the other into self, but perversely, by leaving things the way they are” (196). Such acceptance of what is and reluctance to assume that the rest of the world just happens to coincide with one’s own internal symbology are traits that have marked the relationships to the world in each poet I’ve examined so far. What makes Hejinian’s work ecopoetically valuable in this sense is that readers, in coming to her text, find themselves in the role of Victor to her creature; to read this text successfully, we must learn to love nonidentity even though it ironically comes in human shape.

If the speaker in My Life is textually Frankenstein’s creature, an assemblage of fragments of identity that add up to not a coherent self or even an Other but a complete lack of identity, as readers of such a text, we must go as always in fear of abstraction and with great attentiveness. While it might be possible to slap a label such as “dark mysterious nature” on such an experience and make it more palatable to ourselves, to hide in that narrative is to deny both the creature that actually is and our own reaction to it. By letting the text repeatedly offer us counterexamples to what we think should be, we may experience frustration, but this frustration is a necessary stage in changing ourselves so that we may be more attentive to the gap and avoid colonizing space.
The fragmentation of self that creates nonidentity happens in a variety of ways in *My Life*. One of the most obvious techniques that fragments self is the variable use of pronouns, which rapidly lose cohesion. It is not unusual to face this paratactic situation, which I found just now simply by looking down at the book I’d left propped open earlier: “He alters his voice with his face. This is a verbal plate. I can feel the idea. As for we who ‘love to be astonished,’ my love for these kids. She had rosy cheeks and a sunny smile still has. I can hear the floor if they walk on it” (*ML* 118). This pronoun shifting is everywhere in this text, and trying to sort out not just who each of those pronouns refers to, but whether the “I” that feels the idea and the “I” that hears the floor is impossible. The “I” voice becomes fragmentary in other ways, too. Spahr mentions the way in which desire makes the “I” into very different people, such as the “‘I wanted to be’ sentences, which ‘crosses gender, class, and even species divides’” (Spahr 145). After offering a list of places where “I” fails to signify anything in particular, or where the thing it signifies is not generally a thing that we think of as a self/I, she also points out places where people become “it,” dismantling both self and gender. The same thing happens with “one,” which confuses self and other people; anyone can be “one.” “Hejinian’s despecification of the pronoun also subverts the location-centered, individualist discourse of autobiographies in which the subject claims an absolute position from which to speak” (Spahr 146). Without such an absolute subject position, or even a concrete setting that would help create identity, readers are faced with the strange experience of seeing very familiar moments, images, or ideas radically stripped of identity. In short, we encounter human nonidentity.

This is directly discussed in several places in the text. In one moment, the speaker confronts the situation of attempting to describe a self: “Wanting to ‘explain’ is like having a memory—the person posits itself elsewhere, adolescent-like, as a figure in the distance escaping,
while awaiting the advent of its more glorious self but modestly, even piously. Faces return with menace to the window” (ML 59). Here, the attempt to explain in “normal” ways fragments identity: in order to use language, a person must fragment into the original experience and the observer who watches the experience and describes it, thus creating it as an event. The juxtaposed image of menacing faces watching is a cold counter to the hopeful image of the pious person reshaping herself to be better: language is a double-edged tool. I think it is also telling that the passage does not say “explaining” but “wanting to explain”; the suggestion is that the explanation, like the idealized self, can never be achieved, at least through traditional means. Instead, the speaker builds transient fractions of identity based on coincidence: “All many details needed for seeing, they are like a walking stick. Spin it, then weave it, and wear it out, out. The synchronous keeps its reversible logic, and in this it resembles psychology, or the logic of a person” (60). Reminding me of the classic science teacher’s mantra “correlation is not causation,” things that occur next to each other in time and place often falsely begin to look like a pattern or a deliberate choice. In the same way, this speaker achieves “personhood” through a correlation of time and place and thing and the reader’s own desire to see connections. Personhood becomes an accident of metonymy, of fragments of person placed next to each other, just as for the creature. “A sense of definition (different from that of description, which is a kind of storytelling or recounting, numerical, a list of colors) develops as one’s sense of possibility, of the range of what one might do or experience, closes with the years. So I gave it away. I can offer only the apologies I have committed” (Hejinian, My Life 128) says the speaker late in the text. If to define is to limit not only the thing under definition but to allow language itself to have limits and to enforce those limits on lived experience, this speaker rejects it, and links the idea that s/he should apologize for this with the verb “committed,” which we usually see with the
nouns sins or crimes, suggesting that there’s more at stake in this than just aesthetic preference. To accept the idea of stable or coherent identity is to limit oneself and the world.

While this text is thus alien in a most profound way and thus alienating, strangely, the longer the text goes on, the less frustrating its nonidentity seems. As we watch the speaker’s nonidentity fail to solidify, we are invited to play with our own identities as well, both in terms of ourselves and as this nonidentity reflects outward to the world. “Back and backward, why, wide and wider. Such that art is inseparable from the search for reality. The continent is greater than the content” (119), begins a section near the end of the text. Without pronouns or other stabilizing factors, this refers to anything, anywhere, anyone. Almost seeming to sum up the benefits of fragmented identity, this set of lines suggests that, while language is a tool too small for its task in many ways, the struggle to see and say and be is valuable and necessary. Without artifice (such as language), we cannot see or be anything at all. With it, we can see and be all kinds of things, more kinds than the tool itself would seem to suggest. But the limitations of language are not, strangely, the limitations of language; the experience of learning to love nonidentity and nonrepresentative language through this text reconfigures its readers’ experiences of self and world in such a way as to make us more mindful of the gap between human and world. It also teaches us to let that which resists—space—be itself without needing to rush in and colonize or cover it in a protective layer of abstractions.

People are Strange When You’re a Stranger: The Cell and Estrangement

If, as Lisa Samuels has argued, the reason My Life is frequently taught and read is that even as experimental as it is, the easily-read prose sentences and the autobiographical components of a American woman’s life give readers a familiar anchor amidst the unfamiliar
language, it is no surprise that *The Cell* is out of print. The basic degree of difficulty of this text is much higher: it has significantly more of what we think of as basic poetry components, from line breaks to condensed language to a high degree of sonic play. According to Matthew Jenkins, writer of *Poetic Obligation*, *The Cell* began as a dedication to write one sentence a day “without punctuation” in 1985. This became a game Hejinian played with Kit Robinson, where they’d each write one short lyric per day, about ten to twelve lines, and these could be in response to the other’s poems. Hejinian’s journals claim the length came from Webster’s dictionary entry on “cell” which had a diagram with twelve labeled parts. By Jan 1987, she’d gone to Rome, visited the catacombs, and become obsessed with definitions of the word “cell,” almost all of which show up in the writing. By mid-1987, the text had been named *The Cell* (Jenkins 190). Unlike *My Life*, there is not even a loose narrative or generative mechanism creating coherency for the reader. Given only the titular image of a cell, the reader is launched into relentlessly opaque, untitled poems whose extreme paratactic jumps, scant pronouns, and high degree of sonic play enhance the appearance of “difficulty.”

The experience of reading *The Cell* is deeply disconcerting, even if the reader is prepared by her earlier work. On my first read-through, by page 20’s poem, which seems to be vaguely about a city, I was having a strange reaction:

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But the person with bodily
   exercises identifies with its city
So a person is compensating,
   letting others in front
It seems to have made
   now a model of incommensurability
In it a person isn’t
   satisfied when queried except walking
   expressly
A model of momentum (Hejinian, TC 20)
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At this point, I was in front of my laptop with the *OED* open, looking up even familiar words (incommensurability, expressly), hoping to resolve the tension created as juxtaposed moments actively prevented words from signifying in ways I was aware of. The text, however, resists even this authority, as often even having access to all definitions of a word fails to create narrative, identity, or any of the other structures readers have been taught to depend on. Often, because of sonic play (such as repeated “m” sounds in “seems to have made now a model of incommensurability,” or, if “now” is an adverb and not an object, the repeated dactyls of the phrase), despite linguistic opacity, the poems often convince me of their correctness. As I begin to question the dictionary, I question language itself: why *do* words mean things, anyway?

Who is this person being described, and who is doing the describing? Is it me—after all, I have to work pretty hard to make something coherent out of this text. So if it’s me—how does this fluid incapacity of language affect, or even effect, me? And, despite the opacity of the text and the way in which it resists conventional reading practices, *The Cell* has themes and this is one: language’s significations are arbitrary but mutable through praxis; because our identities are contingent on the language we use, what humans are is not nearly so clearly “ourselves” as we might like to think.

In a taped and then edited interview by Larry McCaffery called “A Local Strangeness: An Interview with Lyn Hejinian,” Hejinian described her interest in not the “self,” but the “person,” which she thinks is a more accurate way of thinking about human identity:

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32 An interesting study about the authority of dictionaries is *The Professor and the Madman*, by Simon Winchester. The book concerns the original *Oxford English Dictionary* project, which relied heavily on individual contributors’ goodwill and voluntary efforts. One contributor offered almost ten thousand definitions, quotations, etc. and was repeatedly invited to visit Oxford, but always politely refused. The lead editor of the project eventually became curious and went to see him, whereupon he found that this prolific scholar was a murderer, deeply delusional, and as a result had been confined in the Broadmoor asylum.
What’s more interesting to me than the concept of this ineffable ‘self’ is the concept of the person, which has to do with activities, our daily and nightly being in the world. The person exists in context—or in an array of contexts enabling and/or requiring us to make choices, act on intentions, make the decisions which move us through life. To that extent, a person is self-creating, a construct or a construction, while at the same time being that which does the constructing.

(McCaffery 130-31)

While Hejinian was responding more to My Life in this interview than to her other work, many of the same themes and philosophical stances carry through her texts. Throughout, Hejinian categorically rejects the idea of the essential “self,” which might be generally understood as a sort of identity construct that does not necessarily have its basis in the material world. As in the above passage from The Cell, where the person enters the poem in the context of “bodily exercises” and proceeds to be defined by location, Hejinian’s personhood is based on the experience of the world and strangeness.

Hejinian’s interest in strangeness is for her a result of really looking at the world and being aware of her own consciousness. In the McCaffrey interview, she comments that “I’ve also been interested in various experiences of what I’d call strangeness—really no more than a heightened awareness that results from radical introspecting…” (127). She goes on to say that in her writing, she wants to put the strangeness of home into relief—a strangeness which is obscured by familiarity and disappears from most people’s awareness when they’re ‘at home.’ To me the sense of ‘local strangeness’ is essential—the strangeness of oneself but also the more fundamental and pervasive strangeness of having a life, with its
various parts, the seeming randomness of one’s encounters with events, the unpredictability of the ways in which it unfolds. (McCaffrey 128)

The unfamiliar not-me things we encounter are always strange to us, albeit often strange in ways that we have significant comforting prejudices about to lessen their strangeness. But Hejinian is interested in creating true strangeness by making our own lives strange to us, particularly in the contexts of our own locations. Unlike placemaking writers who want to make identity, and then use that identity to make space into place, Hejinian wants to reverse the process: use language to get us to have alienating, unknown, spatial experiences of our familiar locations, and then use that experience of alienation to loosen our own identities.

Jacob Edmond deals with both the roots of Hejinian’s interest in strangeness and her own goals for the idea in the essay “Lyn Hejinian and Russian Estrangement,” which explores her connections to Russia and the subsequent experiences of strangeness she found there. While Edmond chooses to focus on Russian culture/language and not discuss Russia as location, because culture and language are location-dependent for Hejinian (and I think she’s right in general), Edmond’s analysis can apply to location as well as just language or culture. “I aim to show how Hejinian’s approximately eight-year period of close engagement with Russia and Russian writers led her to conflate estrangement in art and life” (99), says Edmond, arguing that Russian notions of the role of art and the concept of a person would play a huge role in Hejinian’s evolving work. For Edmond, the goal of estrangement is not discomfort, though that is often part of the experience, but a reinvestment in the world: “For Hejinian, the poetic text, through its impediments (its estranging, self-focused, ‘autonomous’ devices), highlights the process of experiencing (experiential structure and contingency), even as it provides an experience that renews our perception of the world” (101). New perceptions of the world, for
Hejinian, reflected back to new experiences of the self: “Hejinian theorized poetic estrangement as a way to affirm personhood, sociality, and community without essential identity. Her contact with Russia provided another way for her to oppose the strictures of essentialist, restrictive identity while emphasizing sociality” (Edmond 105). Edmond goes on to show that, by using Russia to escape mainstream American poetry standards as well as the restrictions imposed by the Language school of writers’ group identity, “Estrangement thus became a key point of linkage between material text and the social poetics of everyday life, linking art to life through the figure of the person” (106). The Russian sense of self provided a useful contrast to American selfhood, just as being in a setting of heightened strangeness, both geographically and linguistically, allowed Hejinian to experience the peculiar strangeness of radically different personhood. The result for Hejinian is not lessened interaction with the world or a flatter poetics, but instead renewed, attentive engagement with the world, one that seems to me distinctly spatial.

Hejinian describes how to effect this in “Strangeness,” a diary-essay that explores the ways in which language can either encourage us to be conscious of strangeness or prevent it. After opening with the “Contact!” section of Thoreau’s Ktaadn, which becomes a recurring reference in her work, she begins to explore the distinction between two types of language: definition and description, whose paired devices are metaphor and metonymy. Definition is a limitation on what is, with the goal of resisting change. Description via metonymy, however, is a process of expanding what language means, with an eye to attentiveness and possibility: “I propose description as a method of invention and of composition…phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal, original, with a marked tendency toward effecting isolation and displacement, that is, toward objectifying all that’s described and making it strange” (Hejinian, “Strangeness”
140). In other words, by exploring what is through association rather than limitation, Hejinian is able to increase our awareness of our own thought processes and how they relate to the world around us while increasing the way words signify in unexpected directions, making our own language and thus our world more spatial than platial. The strangeness offered by metonymy is useful for a number of reasons: it “operates with several simultaneous but not necessarily congruent logics…moves attention from thing to thing; its principle is combination rather than selection” (147). It “preserves context, foregrounds interrelationship…is unstable. While metonymy maintains the intricateness and discreteness of particulars, its paratactic perspective gives it multiple vanishing points” (147). Unlike metaphor, which requires a locking-down of the things involved for the device to make sense, and a subsequent enforcing of subject position, Hejinian prefers the fluidity and openness of metonymy, which offers many connections or ways of thinking and thus suggests, even in one reader, a multiplicity of subject positions and relationships to the nonhuman world. This is in keeping with Hejinian’s sense of personhood; as she told McCaffery, who asked about her stance on group authorship, “And beyond any sort of aesthetic appeal that collaborative strategies might have, it also seems undeniable to me in a funny way feeling oneself as many selves or as many persons is more accurate” (135).

Hejinian’s person is not only a selflessness based in material culture, it is a plurality.

In short, as metonymic, paratactic descriptions of the world make the world strange, language also in turn makes the language-user strange. It seems odd to describe poetry as realism, she says,

But it is exactly the strangeness that results from a description of the world given in the terms ‘there it is,’ ‘there it is,’ ‘there it is’ that restores realness to things in the world without resorting to ideology….An evolving poetics of description is
simultaneously a poetics of scrutiny. It is description that raises scrutiny to consciousness, and in arguing for this I am proposing a poetry of consciousness, which is by its very nature a medium of strangeness. (153-54)

This idea that both world and human can be described without resorting to merely chucking them in ideological categories and thus dismissing the actual material things themselves seems like a hugely important step forward in the process of learning how humans should relate to the world. When Hejinian uses the term “ideology” here, it seems to me very like Morton’s false ideas that live in between the foreground and background. Hejinian’s language of description, then, seems to be an attempt to limit the ways in which we can simply linguistically colonize either language-user or world under the banner of things like nature.

Unlike My Life, which makes the person that is the speaker of the poem strange to the reader, who generally remains a fairly consistent entity, the effect of The Cell is to make the reader strange to him/herself. This begins linguistically with the title image of a cell, which begs the question of what kind of cell. The OED lists 22 basic definitions of “cell,” many of which have sub-meanings. But perhaps the most intimate, and likely the one which we all start from unless we have specific training in another direction, is the biological term for the tiny life-units of which we are all composed. That the basic component of me is also a thing that I cannot see and am not consciously aware of being is an interesting image to start the text, one which is both inclusive and estranging at the same time. In this way, the title itself introduces one of the main themes of the text: being strange to oneself. Other common cells, such as prison cells or monks’ cells, suggest further estrangement and detachment even as there is introspection and identification. Ultimately, whichever definition of “cell” the reader chooses is almost irrelevant,
because nearly all definitions of the word, from battery to an atmospheric area of localized convective activity to a resistance/terrorist group, not only show up in this text but contain this push-pull of being both inclusive and exclusive, having barriers that are permeable and yet resist exchange. The overwhelming feeling is of something that is both “it” and yet contains within the word a contradictory “not-it.” While the most visible concerns in *The Cell* are language and identity, I think this same push/pull, or inclusive/exclusive dual reading is also Bryson’s place/space tension: the known, describable location versus the unknowable location that resists us. With this tension, itself a way of understanding how Language poetry views language and text, readers are launched in.

As in *My Life*, personhood is hugely tied up in language, and all of the loosening qualities of language that make for a fragmented, unstable nonidentity are in play here. Like in *My Life*, these include things like shifting pronouns, phrases that resist connection to previous or subsequent material, and so on. Even very straightforward descriptions of what a person is like are often immediately thwarted by their subsequent indented lines, such as “A person drives, it is / covered by ear” (13), “A person has a favorite / food / Such is life” (25), “Every person sticks up in / its sunbath” (164), or “The person around its own / spine or victim and looking” (181). Except for the disruptive qualities of these lines as opposed to the earlier text’s internal sentence cohesion, these could come from *My Life*. But this text does have a good deal to say about the state of personhood, and it is often both more overtly thematic and more clear. First, this is a text that is overtly hyperaware that language creates identity and is interested in pushing this capacity. Beginning with the overall thinness of pronouns in general and focusing on the way in which “person” takes the “it” pronoun, the text overtly comments on the way that language can be used not just to create identity but to deliberately create nonidentity, the lack of consistent
selfhood. Often this is achieved through extreme perception of perception/consciousness of consciousness. The poem dated November 13, 1986 (Hejinian, TC 31) opens with “I meet myself rarely to / experience the coincidence of my / objectivity with my subjectivity” (lines 1-3). Already the first set of lines suggests a very complicated view of what a person is. The initial sense that “I” can meet itself, but rarely does, is funny. But that lightness is weighted with the idea that the goal of this introspection is to experience the tension between objectivity and subjectivity. In general, we tend to think of subjectivity as immediate and objectivity difficult and attainable only by things like the scientific method or a courtroom proceeding, but this set of lines complicates that. Instead, with the dual meaning of “coincidence” as both “occurring at the same time” and “happening by accident or chance,” doubt enters the picture. Both simultaneity and doubt thus are a part of both and objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity and subjectivity of course have their own dual meanings: both words are either a quality of judgment or a position in relation to something else—not to mention which they each evoke parts of speech. While it seems impossible that the judgment meanings of these words could overlap, it is entirely possible that the position meanings could, not only grammatically but in viewpoint: in imagining myself someone else’s object, I am the subject of my own imagined vision. Thus the speaker of this poem becomes a site of huge overlap of ways of perceiving, knowing, and being the object of

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33 In the McCaffrey interview, Hejinian talks about her interest in William James: “I’m especially interested in his approach to the psychology of consciousness and cognitive perceptions….I’m particularly interested in consciousness, or in the consciousness of being conscious which seems central to poetry” (McCaffrey 127). This is particularly relevant in James’ interest in changing consciousness that does not feel like change and his charge that we should practice introspection as a legitimate means of objective study of self, as the opening lines of the Hejinian poem here indicate. Hejinian’s interest in James also connects to her interest in Russia and estrangement: “He writes a great deal in his Principles of Psychology about language as instrumental in forming consciousness. The [Russian] Formalist concept of strangeness (ostranenie) and the role poetic language plays in a system of alienating devices is also in James, although that’s not the vocabulary he uses….but conceiving of language as a tool for understanding and for making the world palpable is very Jamesian, or James is very Russian in this” (McCaffrey 133). I might argue that the connection between Russian estrangement and James’ consciousness/introspection concepts is Hejinian herself, and particularly her poetic work which draws from both sources and seeks to reconcile, or at least make use of, two very different cultural viewpoints on what a person is. Suggesting that one human is, in fact, a multitude of persons is itself a very consistent Hejinian gesture.
perception or knowledge. And it certainly is rare for us to try to hold all these experiences in
mind at once, to try to be both subject/subjective and object/objective simultaneously.

The poem continues to discuss this experience by bringing in the overt awareness not just
of this kind of self-inquiry, but the language in which it is conducted:

This incongruence is independent of
    the possibility that a person
    had an articulate organ which
    he called a lung (4-7)

While at first blush this section might seem to be saying that these observations exist without
language, I think that is a too-rapid misread, particularly as the readers are receiving these
thoughts precisely because a person had language, and because the incongruity depends on the
way words function in a sentence as compared to the experience of being in the world that the
words are designed to communicate. By asking us to consider whether the experiences of
objectivity/subjectivity could exist independently of language and making us aware of our own
implication in the text and its language and therefore its sense of how language creates
identity/nonidentity, this “incongruence” passes on to the text’s readers. Are we capable of
having thoughts, or reflecting on experience, without language? If not, is a person the sum of its
experience with language? Or does the material—the cells, the meat and organs—of my body
provide another way to have experience independent of language? Are these views of a person
mutually exclusive?

The poem continues to conflate language and body, consciousness (both itself and of
itself) and lack thereof, and objective/subjective experiences throughout. Lines such as “The
label sticks up from / the collar but the hair / hides it” (15-17) again put language in relation to
the body and cast both in a haze of doubt. The juxtaposition of “The place warm / The space bar
worn” (19-20) use sound as well as image to connect language to the actions of the body, but that connection is immediately undercut by

There’s no such thing as
yesterday which rolls under and
holds its information up and
forward for long (20-23)

Because we know there is such a thing as yesterday, the enjambment pushes us forward to find that the lines may be just suggesting that yesterday’s “information” is no longer accessible today. This is true if knowing is a bodily experience—I can’t go back to yesterday and re-experience it; even if I could take a mulligan, there’d be no way to totally recreate yesterday. But if “information” can be transmitted through language or memory, of course I do have yesterday still. Concluding with

The information is like a
balmy palpitation
I like everything at a
level below its name (26-27)

The poem ends on a continued conflict between ideas. On one hand, information is a “balmy palpitation”—even when a person is very used to heart palpitations, they are still alarming or at the very least disruptive. “Balmy” is suggestive of bodily processes—the blood itself as it takes an odd path through the heart, or even sweat as the palpitation either disrupts heart function or just makes the person anxious. Contrasted directly with this image of body-in-charge is the sudden “I like everything” statement, which gives us not only the idea of a coherent self, but that the self’s preferences or ideas suddenly are recapturing the bodily experience by choosing to like or take them on. Further complicating this is the idea that the liking is not just linguistic, but “below its name,” or in a way that is more basic than language. This tension between body and language is not really resolved, only mitigated by the conscious decision to “like” it, suggesting
the ecocritical tension between constructed experience and unconstructed external world. However, the unconstructed external world here is the speaker’s own body and alinguistic experiences. Because of fun with pronouns and the intense engagement this text demands, I think this rapidly becomes a problem for the reader as well as whoever the speaker of this poem is. The text is asking for me to become Frankenstein’s creature, a being inherently strange to myself even though the parts of my body and my consciousness may in fact be familiar to me.

The effect of *The Cell* is not simply to estrange me from myself and call it a day, however; it has clear ethical ramifications about how this kind of nonidentity should relate to other people and, I would argue, by extension the nonhuman world. Ethical argument about the nature of language, both overt and covert, is one of the key features of the Language school overall and Hejinian in particular, and *The Cell* is certainly no exception. G. Matthew Jenkins, in *Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry After 1945*, is interested in the way Hejinian’s work in terms of what he calls “permeable ethics,” which is another example of the push-pull, inclusive/exclusive nature of this text, language itself, and our experience with the nonhuman world in terms of place/space. After citing Steve McCaffery on the way in which readers “encipher” the text, thus showing that the text is “another way of inviting the Other, as the unknowable reader, into the poem” (Jenkins 183), Jenkins goes on to show this push-pull in *The Cell*. While the text is certainly very opaque, and feels “claustrophobic” and closed because only the speaker’s/Hejinian’s own experiences of perception provide external referents, Jenkins finds it “strangely permeable” for two reasons:

1. the shifting syntax within the lyric opens the poem to syntactic frames ‘outside’ the poem, to different contexts or ‘language games’ that attempt to
control meaning; and (2) the lack of tight reference...allows the saying of ethical responsibility to enter the text on the levels of grammar, syntax, punctuation, line, section, and whole poem much more readily. (183)

While the poem may look like a closed totality, Jenkins believes it invites the Other in to such a degree that language itself seems to break down at the word level under the multiplicity of meanings: can this say anything at all? But Jenkins says “this tearing [apart of language] is not a curse but an ethical opportunity because, as she writes in the poem ‘The Person,’ ‘closure is misanthropic’” (Jenkins 184). Because the poem is so completely open to alterity, the inner workings of language and the ethical structures language creates are exposed. Jenkins’ central ethical target in this chapter is Hejinian’s ethics of sexual difference, which is outside the scope of this study. However, an important stage in that argument is Hejinian’s release of judgment, which he sees as inherently closed because it works via explicit pronouncements, in favor of “ethics as the obligation inherent in language” (186). He cites The Cell’s poem from December 13/14 1986 and January 6 1987, one poem constructed over three days. The poem, overtly about obligation, perception, and poetry, he explains that

The above poem suggests that morality is not a given but a deep questioning that relates to the poem’s very structure. Moreover, this obligation does not come from some general Logos from which flows a didactic moral system; instead, it arises from ‘some eternal, never-ending, everyday task.’ A far cry from a morality of pronouncement. (Jenkins 187)

In other words, just as the text liberates language from restrictive meanings and thus opens itself to all readers, so it liberates ethics from the restrictive pronouncements of judgment and opens itself to a much more fluid ethics of permeability based on “what morality cannot bring into its
systematized context—the very relation to the call of the Other, language, sociality. An opening of the cell in its very closure” (188). The relationship suggested by Jenkins here is dependent not on performing specific actions in relation to the Other but in changing one’s perception of how one relates to the Other in the same way that this text changes one’s relationship to language: an openness to whatever or whoever is out there, but which is based on heightened awareness of one’s own experience and a willingness to experience unstable identity in both cases. This seems congruent to me with Timothy Morton’s suggestion that the best relationship to environment is environment-as-question, as an ongoing process of exploration; morality is not knowing-that but rather an ongoing “what is it now?” This seems to me to clearly link the ethics of Language poetry with a commitment to spatial awareness.

*The Cell* is full of encounters of environment-as-question, of wondering what a fair relationship to the world through language might look like. Having been made strange to ourselves, and having been made permeable as Jenkins suggests, means that we are unstable selves willing to exist in relation to an unstable world. In short, this is the kind of awareness humans need to cultivate in order to maintain relationships to a world of space rather than a world of place. Through texts like *The Cell*, readers experience not just their own nonidentity but that of the world, and learn that not only is it possible, but desirable, as it results in increased freedom. In the poem dated January 19, 1987 (Hejinian, *TC* 60-61), a speaker with nonidentity encounters a world that resists construction, and the result for both parties is nonidentity, but a desirable comfort within nonidentity. The poem opens with a very overt exploration of language as interface between human and everything else:

> Write worldwide— with the muscular power of uncertainty—and approve the world
> Everything is subject to visibility
and the represented model
is wobbling (lines 1-6)

The beginning at first sounds very uncharacteristic of this text overall, with a command, but quickly is undercut with the word “muscular.” How can one write muscular text? Looked at another way, all writing is literally muscular, since some body part has to manipulate some instrument, whether it’s a hand and a pen or vocal chords and a microphone hooked to transcription software. The next line seems to approve the doubt or question enacted by the confusing “muscular” by celebrating the “power of uncertainty,” which of course then reflects back to the act of writing itself, reasserting the theme of the instability of language. It is only then that the poem introduces the idea of approval, leaving “the world” on its own line, alone. Looked at as a traditional sentence, the first three lines ask us to write our experience of the world by being uncertain about the world. The best relationship is not a claiming or a defining, but a state of being open to not knowing, being aware that what one thinks or even experiences is perhaps not necessarily the case, even if we have no way of confirming it. The next three lines back up these ideas. With a heightened attention in this poem to dual meanings, “Everything is subject to visibility” suggests both “everything can be seen” and “everything is the subject in a sentence involving the word visibility,” with the necessary object of that sentence as whatever isn’t “everything.” Is this the reader, who is the only thing outside the poem in the reading interaction? Is it also everything—everything looks at everything else all the time? This means that “the represented model” in the next line could be the poem, the world, the reader, or all of the above, highlighting the constructed nature of everything and everyone, and thus the unconstructed space that exists outside our awareness. That the model is “wobbling” suggests the imperfect nature of not only literal, bodily seeing, but of the constructed things that are our interpretations of our senses: even our own constructs are not as secure as we might imagine.
them to be. Even our “selves” are not secure. These sets of lines are nicely parallel in a number of ways: they look alike on the page, as three lines that are medium, long, and then just one thing; they have bodily references (muscular, visibility) tied to doubtful ideas (uncertainty, representation); and the last line is nicely sonically joined (world, wobbling). The effect of all of this is to both bind the person and the world together but to cast doubt on both: what is perceiving what? What are the results of that perception, and can we trust them? These lines make us both very aware of the constructed nature of both human and nonhuman world and then cast doubt on those constructs as they exist in relation to each other. Because, as Jenkins pointed out, the desire for definition/pronouncement has been released in favor of a willingness to question and be questioned, human nonidentity has been brought into relation with space.

This particular poem goes on to explore specific issues of sex/body, but other instances of more general nonidentity/space connections happen rather frequently in the text. In one place, a view of “One unit of rain” is followed by “It raises this question: do / you / Do you sometimes want to / be disembodied” (Hejinian, TC 42), the choppy phrase echoing the idea that seeing the world as something other than a consistent whole (rain is generally not a count noun) results in disjointed identity. January 18, 1987 declares that “Consciousness is an impertinent fighter” and that “Fact is an impertinent fighter / too” with the result that the speaker is left with “Introspection is at a standstill / —incompatibility makes me pensive—stationary / Pouncing on substance and crush / I think” (59), suggesting echoes of the subjectivity (consciousness) and objectivity (fact) debate again, complete with the way in which trying to form consistent identity or metanarrative ultimately fails the speaker, resulting in looking to the material world (substance) for identity to “crush” the not-useful train of thought. A poem that begins “Many parts of experience displace / each other in a person’s / life—and still it manages / to light the
pilot light” (66) suggests that identity or experience structures that are fluid are those which successfully manage to navigate the world. Another poem suggests what a person is: “Here is a sequence of / broken changes and there another: / biography” (89), echoing the work of My Life but in an even more detached way, as there is no overt person linked to these sequences of broken changes. The poem ends “Everything gripped by the world, / or by a small part / of it” (89), suggesting that just as a person’s identity is a stream of broken changes, so too for the world, and it is this jumbledness that both connects and separates human and world. Even in these brief fragments—and there are many more throughout the text—the way in which nonidentity questions and creates its relation to space permeates The Cell.

We’re Not Scaremongering; This is Really Happening: The Trauma of The Cell

The idea of experiencing this kind of loosened identity in conjunction with a more spatial than platial world can be scary. After all, the placemakers have a point; it’s much easier to live in “my” world and feel like I know who I am and what’s going on than it is to live in a state of constant questioning of both me and everything else. In fact, this rather reminds me of the “trauma” stage of the sublime, which is not usually noted for being a pleasant experience. But rather than being counterproductive, this trauma can force readers into a heightened awareness of self as in environment-in-question, engaging humans spatially without leaving the option for placemaking and thus a return to safety. Eventually, while never becoming completely comfortable, this can result in the ability to accept being uncomfortable, an important aspect of learning to live with space.

The question of how to avoid leaving people in a fear or trauma state because it is assumed that this is bad is, I think, responsible for a lot of the way we narrate our relationships to
the nonhuman world. For example, while some poetry has willfully left us in a state of trauma or and fear, the overwhelming tendency is to offer at least a small window for a strategy or worldview that will allow the reader to escape\textsuperscript{34}. This is congruent with longstanding environmental science practices in terms of presenting information. Bill Blakemore, in an \textit{ABC News} article entitled “‘Hug the Monster’ for Realistic Hope in Global Warming,” reports that at a climate conference held at Harvard, scientists expressed that they “often simply didn’t want to speak openly about what they were learning about how disruptive and frightening the changes of manmade global warming were clearly going to be for ‘fear of paralyzing the public’” (Blakemore). However, this often has the effect of having no effect; rather than becoming invested, people are free to ignore what is presented with apologies and low importance. Blakemore’s article focuses instead on how environmental science language is shifting to include more frightening language with the result that rather than avoiding fear, people are being encouraged to embrace it. Borrowing from the US Air Force’s strategies for teaching pilots how to deal with frightening situations, “Hugging the monster” is a method of learning to expect to feel fear and make responsible or practical decisions not in spite of it, but with and because of it. Reflecting on the role of writers such as reporters and bloggers, many of whom have shared scientists’ concerns about fears, Blakemore suggests that they too learn to hug the monster. He concludes that this is already happening “there are now signs that, little by little, voices and personalities are beginning to emerge around the world who are starting to hug this monster, manage [sic] the fear, and turning the emotions it causes into action” (Blakemore). In other

\textsuperscript{34} Even something really vigorous and sarcastic like W.S. Merwin’s “For a Coming Extinction” implies, by its title, that the extinction has not yet happened and perhaps, if we change our actions, we won’t have to be the self-important assholes the poem suggests we currently are. It’s the unusual poem that just gives us a problem and lets us sit there; arguably, A. R. Ammons’ \textit{Garbage} is one poem that just leaves us standing in the middle of the dump and never really lets us look away from ourselves, though even this contains moments of release or escape.
words, not only environmental science but the interpretive genres are embracing fear as a useful focusing, generative agent. Clinical research agrees, as in Ezra M. Markowitz and Azim Fr. Sharif’s article “Climate change and moral judgment.” Their research into motivating people to care about issues such as climate change suggests that people care more about burdens than benefits.

Recent findings suggest that individuals are significantly more concerned over the ethical implications of saddling future generations with burdens than they are about providing benefits….Thus, it seems that focusing messaging on the burdens that unmitigated climate change will leave on future generations (for example, higher adaptation costs, greater human suffering from disease) rather than on potential benefits (for example, a viable, vibrant planet) may be a simple and easily administered way to bolster the moral concern of individuals over the impacts of climate change. (Markowitz 245)

In other words, people are more easily motivated by fear of bad things than they are by the desire for good ones. The article goes on to specify that while emphasizing burdens is productive, it must be paired with emotional carrots, not sticks; instead of fear leading to stagnation and paralysis, the fear must be paired with action or narrative possibilities that will result in emotions such as gratitude or pride at successfully dealing with fear itself or the object that inspired fear (Markowitz 245). The result of hugging the monster must feel productive in some way. In short, research seems to indicate that, rather than being something we should carefully avoid, fear is a useful tool that is both motivational and can lead to productive outcomes.
Ecocritique that embraces fear is also becoming a more common tactic than simple praise or activist anger. One such critique is Lee Rozelle’s *Ecosublime*. While Rozelle’s text is overtly activist and tends to focus directly on specific environmental crisis such as global climate disruption or industrial pollution and accompanying texts like *The Waste Land* or *White Noise*, the key of his argument is awareness caused by trauma, which leads to a beneficial restructuring of the human/nonhuman relationship. Because productive trauma is at the heart of his project, I believe parts of his methodology can be valid for other texts that work to disrupt the human relationship to the nonhuman world in alternate ways, such as Hejinian’s work, despite his activism.

For Rozelle, the ecosublime is based on awareness of self in relation to location: “Ecosublimity can thus be thought of as the awe and terror that occurs when literary figures experience the infinite complexity and contingency of place. This aesthetic moment prompts responsible engagements with natural spaces, and it recalls crucial links between human subject and nonhuman world” (1). Gaining awareness in this way is not a simple “this is my place” claiming gesture, though Rozelle is certainly positing a platial rather than a spatial relationship, but a complex sublime process. Rozelle’s argument is based on Christine L. Oravec’s understanding of the sublime process of perception, which has three stages: 1) the encounter with a thing or situation larger than oneself, 2) a feeling of sublime trauma or terror caused by the disparity between the largeness of the sublime object and the inability of the human to contain the experience, and 3) the resolution stage as the perceiver finds a way to encompass or identify with the sublime object, which results in joy. Rozelle argues that when the perceived object is not merely too beautiful or too awe-inspiring to encompass, but is also coupled with contemporary knowledge about the state of the world, the result is not the simple movement
towards joy that usually characterizes the natural sublime, but a much more intense, longer-lasting engagement, and one that is not nearly so tidy as traditional understandings of the sublime: “the moment of sublimity is no longer staged against an unchanging natural backdrop. No longer are we inspired by a sublime collapse of self, but we now also feel awe and terror in the face of a global breakdown” (Rozelle 4). I do not believe he means that the sublime no longer produces a loss of self, but rather that in the moment of sublime trauma, both self and world lose their former identities. His examples include Wendell Berry’s *A Timbered Choir* and *Twin Peaks*, and he says that in these texts,

> the viewing subject experiences an ecosublime strength, violence, and terror in the realizations that an infinitely complex natural ecology has been fragmented by human intervention, that humankind may not know how to reconfigure the natural machine as it dies, and that there may be no real way to sustain human life on the planet after the inconceivably complex system becomes irreparably disassembled. Images of human overpopulation, species extinction, decentralization, and ozone layer depletion challenge Kantian reason and propel the imagination to grapple with harsh realities; this cognitive negotiation sparks a sublime jolt and subsequent awareness. (Rozelle 7-8)

There seem to be several key components here that make the ecosublime function. One is a failed construction of the world; the old construction cannot be adapted to suit the new purpose. Parallel to the failure of world constructions is that this awareness forces not a failure of human identity construction as well, with a resultant necessity of building or assuming a new one, as the old identity is tied to old constructions of the nonhuman world and cannot be recaptured. And while Rozelle himself does not seem to emphasize this, it is apparent that the new constructs for
both self and world are ones which must include change and lack of knowledge in their makeup; any stable constructs or ones which can be assumed to be fully known will be unable to cope with a situation in which both humans and world are mutually changing each other.

There are indeed problematic points in Rozelle’s argument, such as a heavy reliance on bioregionalism\textsuperscript{35} or a tendency to imply traditional salvation environmentalist narratives. However, I do think that his basic methodology is sound and can be ported to other texts and theoretical frameworks. That heightened awareness of the way in which human and nonhuman mutually interact to destabilize identity and, through remaining in that moment of trauma, produce new unstable constructs based on acknowledgment of the connection between human and nonhuman seems remarkably congruent to Hejinian’s poetics of space and nonidentity. What invigorates Rozelle’s narrative and makes it useful despite its theoretical problems is not just the way it uses trauma to recreate constructs but the way in which such reconstruction is not an aesthetic choice but an imperative. As Rozelle asks on the first page, “When does an awareness of home provoke terror and awe? When it’s burning” (1). While thinking about the nonhuman world in the past was a choice, ignoring the world is no longer an option due to the increasingly-visible environmental degradation happening everywhere. Equally, I would suggest, location becomes a problem when it is space, provoking terror and refusing to fall into human constructions.

\textsuperscript{35} The limitations of bioregionalism mean that it is unavailable as a solution for a large percentage of the world’s population. Since bioregionalism requires living in one area for an extended period of time, access to educational resources, and frankly, a significant amount of free time, it becomes unachievable for those who must migrate for reasons from job requirements to war, for those who either financially or geographically do not have access to education, or who simply do not have time to do anything but work and sleep. Explorations of environment and race suggest that not all people have equal relationships to landscape, and what one person may experience as a re habitation dream may be a nightmare landscape of oppression to another. For more on the limitations of bioregionalism as well as some work reinvigorating the concept, see Michael Vincent McGinnis’ \textit{Bioregionalism}. For more on race and the environment, see Paul Outka’s \textit{Race and Nature} and Joni Adamson’s \textit{The Environmental Justice Reader}. 
Rozelle’s suggestion that we embrace fear and use it as the basis of our renegotiated relationship with the world seems like an excellent preparation for Morton’s dark ecology. Morton points out that our current metaphysical model for our relationship with the nonhuman world is one where solidarity with that nonhuman is a choice, not a requirement (188), which is of course not true. That we believe we have a choice means many people may choose, however falsely, to opt out of the scary situation we find ourselves in. However, Morton says that “The present ecological emergency means that you need not be comfortable in order to do theory” (197), and that in fact awareness of the state of affairs means that we will not be comfortable. However, this is where dark ecology comes in: a body of theory that is able to “hug the monster,” to include in its basic operating principles emotions of fear and anxiety, and awareness of toxicity and degradation. Morton’s dark ecology asks us not to act towards future benefits but to embrace fear and look at potential burdens:

So while we campaign to make our world ‘cleaner’ and less toxic, less harmful to sentient beings, our philosophical adventure should in some ways be quite the reverse. We should be finding ways to stick around with the sticky mess we’re in and that we are, making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness, practicing ‘hauntology’ (Derrida’s phrase) rather than ontology. So out with the black clothes, eyeliner, and white makeup, on with the spangly music: dark ecology” (Morton 188).

This is where Morton diverges sharply from Rozelle, whose ideas are useful but who was unable to chase them far enough. Rozelle’s final goal is to get readers to practice bioregional activism geared at saving the world as a result of the ecosublime traumatic experience, whereas Morton’s is to get us to identify with toxicity. Rozelle’s theory, which ostensibly asks us to continually
experience ecosublime trauma in order to bind us further to the world, paradoxically ends with a chirpy revision of Rachel Carson’s “A Fable for Tomorrow” in which the city is a successful “decentralized biome” that is green, productive, and happy—and in which no one experiences ecosublime trauma. Alternatively, Morton suggests that identification with toxic nonidentity is with us always, the result will be what he calls “critical choice”:

Its ethics look more like perversion—or like acknowledging the perverse quality of choice in itself—the shutting down of possibilities, the acceptance of death. It is what Walden calls ‘liv[ing] deliberately’—without having to retreat to the woods to do so. This is critical choice. Consumerist ideological choice preserves the idea that we still have a choice. Critical choice shuts down the possibility of choosing again” (183).

In other words, critical choice is a mode of thinking where toxic awareness means that every choice is both potentially fatal (increasing toxicity) and at the same time, non-refundable. Critical choice is one where there is no “nature” to recapture our actions, such as a “natural balance” that means our excesses will eventually be automatically healed. It is a high-stakes game with a healthy dose of fear, but the result is neither romantic nature visions nor a cult of death, but just an ability to process and deal with what is:

Instead of trying to pull the world out of the mud, we could jump down into the mud….We choose and accept our own death, and the fact of mortality among species and ecosystems. This is the ultimate rationality: holding our mind open for the absolutely unknown that is to come. Evolution will not be televised. One cannot have a video of one’s own extinction….ecological criticism must politicize
the aesthetic. We choose this poisoned ground. We will be equal to this senseless actuality. Ecology may be without nature. But it is not without us. (Morton 205)

The result of hugging the monster is escaping paralysis via fear, escaping failed visions of a mystical nature that will save us from ourselves, and even escaping the sense that one’s own actions are irrelevant. By transmuting fear to identification with nonidentity and a willingness to entrench in toxicity without needing an escape plan, we will be able to face what is and make productive decisions about who we are and what we will do.

*The Cell’s* poem from January 23, 1988 (Hejinian, *TC* 121-122) is one of the more abstract poems in a book which works to increase the abstraction of otherwise concrete images. This is an uncomfortable poem, but one which resolves its own tensions by accepting fear and spatial nonidentity. The poem begins

My sincere head is muffled
in its mind
What does it have against
metaphor
A thought that’s a taking
of time (lines 1-7)

In *The Cell*, the “head” is the site of sensory input, and while it has elements of thinking, has access to things other than thinking. It is also in some ways a location of released judgment in Jenkins’ sense, as the head often perceives without necessarily deciding. Here, the head is in

36 Perhaps the best example of the “head” is in the March 3, 1987 poem (Hejinian, *TC* 78), in which it is an overt and repeated subject. Here, the head is a “threaded egg” followed by “new again,” suggesting the head as a site of genesis and birth. Later the poem lists a series of nouns created by (or contained in) a “full head,” and as a result “The question ‘who?’ disappears,” suggesting that sensory experience can create identity, or somehow changes identity. The poem breaks stanza and then continues “In short, I promised to / be here and here I / am to be found,” suggesting that identity is a constructed result of sensory experience. In the same stanza, “I” decides “To add a head // And hear the landscape,” further tightening the link between identity as a thing constructed in wake of sensory experience, but with the suggestion that identity is always necessarily in a state of change. The unexpected conflation of “landscape,” which is a visual construct, with the act of listening while standing outside somewhere, echoes the juxtaposition of construct vs. what it is unable to capture fully, suggesting the head has access to things
conflict with the mind, and one of these—either the more constructing mind or the more sensory-inclined body—has something against metaphor. Either a disagreement in the colloquial sense, or in a more literal sense, perhaps it has something that metaphor does not. That head and mind have a metonymic relationship but not necessarily a clear metaphorical one is at stake, but so is the idea that metaphor is a thought that “takes.” We cannot think without interpretive gestures—no unconstructed experience—but metaphor is a particularly aggressive claiming of experience, which is perhaps why head and maybe mind are troubled here.

The poem continues “Each person has its own / idea of sensuality / Constructedness” (8-10). These lines highlight the way in which even something that seems so concrete and external as our sensory experiences are in fact constructed; we selectively pay attention to our senses, which of course are subject to their own failures and erasures. By switching from “mind” or “head” to “person” the question becomes a problem of identity: who we are also becomes implicated in constructedness. The poem continues:

Maybe constructedness could take forever
The scent of trees and
human problems
The scene which concentrates—it’s
difficult to concentrate on the
motion itself
I would have to be
reminded of myself (11-18)

The first line reminds us that our constructions of ourselves and of our world are always changing—or at least should be changing, since the world itself always changes. Our sense of the world is partially based on the world itself as seen through our senses, and partially of our own inner worlds (human problems). The poem begins to loosen its sense of human agency in

that “I” does not. While the likely “most important” subject of this poem is writing’s relationship to identity, writing is mentioned once, while the head is always present, suggesting its basic importance in constructing identity and world, and particularly the things that escape our constructions.
the next line as the word “scene” could be either undergoing an unconscious distillation process or a conscious agent trying to reflect. That the next line says that concentration is difficult could reflect back to the scene or could just be an echo transitioning from scene to person. This ambiguity suggests the interplay of human and world nonidentity: who or what is responsible for our experiences/constructions? That it is difficult to track the motion—of thoughts, of constructions, of landscape, of a moment of time—continues the uneasy, unsatisfied mood of this poem. As showing us the tree only makes readers less sure of location, the poem gains a significant spatial element. In order to know something for sure about what is happening in this moment, the speaker would have to be “reminded of myself”—someone would have to draw a clear definition or lock down a construct in a fixed way, which the poem suggests is impossible—it would take “forever.”

The poem says “It proceeded—“(19), suggesting it might define a person or the speaker, and then interrupts itself. The ambiguous “it” has a number of things it cannot say—but of course in the poem does say things anyway; as soon as you attempt not to think about a thing, you find you’ve already thought about it by defining it in order to avoid it. The first is a confusing image where “the man / in the myth” rather than in the moon “became a / eucalyptus tree transparently” instead of suddenly or some other more expected adverb. These disrupted expectations remind us of linguistic constructs about the world and then break them, asking us to consider not just literal contexts (how do humans relate to trees?) but potential other ways of thinking (for example, eucalyptus is a non-native import to the United States, where its pests were difficult to control because of lack of native predatory species—does that relate? Do Australian aboriginal dream-songs involving trees?). None of these can be confirmed, none can be the “correct” construct. The voice tries to not think another interrupting thought, this one
about how “the house / for sale stands in the / perceptual field of paranoia” (23-25). A house for sale is an image of ambiguity, or transition, or liminal space; by introducing this image of uncertainty with paranoia, this section, already a bit troubling, grows ominous, as a home-place is lost to space. Though the world of this poem has been destabilizing into space this whole time, I think nothing creates an ecosublime-trauma-like discomfort like this line, which suggests the instability of both our literal built constructions and the transitory quality of homes, of feeling at home. If home is for sale, lost in a void of space and transition, what is there? This discomfort reflects back on the rest of the poem as a queasy loss of control and uncertainty about future events.

“It would have to repeat / itself (but it can’t repeat / itself)” (26-28) the poem says, which is eye-catching because even as the two lines repeat the exact same enjambment, they claim repetition is not possible. And of course it is not; even if a person tries to repeat something, it often doesn’t work, as here; the second instance is always modified by the first. In a Heraclitean gesture, the poem points out that no two experiences or thoughts can ever be the same; both the world and the person that perceives the world are always in flux. And awareness of this produces anxiety, paranoia, speech that interrupts itself. Constructs that interrupt themselves. Even the parentheses in this set of lines give the impression that they will be used like Olson’s, to suggest ever-further-onward, but then they slam to a stop: we cannot escape.

The poem ends on a surprising note, given the tension and anxiety that characterize everything to this point. The last three lines relieve the tension by releasing the need for coherent, stable constructs: “There is a repeat but / it’s made for response—the / sincerest opportunity to see it” (29-31). This points out how the second “repeat / itself” has to be read differently than the first one, and it invites the reader to come up with a reason for the repetition.
Instead of being anxious about suddenly being on the spot, this section assures us that now we have “the sincerest opportunity to see it.” The pronoun is highly ambiguous. Grammatically, we could be pointed towards the “repeat,” which suggests that only when our attention is sharpened by an unexpected gesture, puzzle, or fearful object do we stop merely looking at something and start an active inquisitive process of seeing. That last pronoun also connects to the prior it from “It proceeded,” which could be almost any element of the poem: head, mind, person, construct, scene. In this final moment, by drawing the entire poem into question, the reader is launched into even sharper awareness of the constructed artifice of the text and of the reading act. In a book that demands incredibly active reader response, everything I have actively read into this text is put in question, including my sense of myself in the world around me: I assume nonidentity in space, and am forced to confront the fear of not knowing. At the end of this poem, I asked myself, “Where am I, and what am I doing?” And unlike usual moments where the question is meant as a rhetorical gesture where the automatic answer is “something stupid,” in *The Cell*, the question is legitimate.

Rather than simply provoking unease, lines in *The Cell* that are unsure of the relation of self to world encourage us not to experience tension or anxiety as simply bad, but rather to use them as a way into the poem, into the ideas of construct and human/nonhuman relationships, and the role language plays in determining our experiences. The tension between language and our experience of the world is in play throughout the text: “Home is jargon for bird / in your lap / People see faces in everything” (37); “The world is cold and / bears wild description” (45); “I will tell you what / adventures befell me yesterday late / between trees / What narrations befell” (127); “Mention rain and grammar follows / Proximity. Sometimes I feel the guilt / of inquiry” (123); “The sun over the / cold water gives us a / thrill or an unobtainable form” (169); “We
don’t *understand* what we / hear, we *anticipate* it / A hill in sunlight only / slightly stubble” (177). These tensions become productive as the text overall suggests that it is through embracing the trauma and fear, the reader is able to come to terms with nonidentity both in the speaker/reader who constructs the text and the spatial world that lies beyond the poem’s constructions.

**Recruiting for the Resistance Cell: Hejinian and Spatial Ecopoetics**

“I get mortally warmed up / when I write the cold / of poetry against the rocks / on the ground” (*The Cell* 42) writes Hejinian. The tension between the “cold of poetry,” itself a repeating idea in many of Hejinian’s texts, versus the “rocks on the ground” suggests the way to experience the world in the most productive way is to live inside this tension. While construct cannot contain space, it can gesture to it and get us “warmed up.” In reading Hejinian’s texts, each word is potentially in doubt, but in a doubt that is productive and connective as much as it is fiercely isolative. I see each word as its own tiny cell in the body of the sentence, its own resistance group pushing against identity and fixity. As I read Hejinian, I become aware that I’m alone in the dark, and words themselves have become fragments I have shored against my ruins. After all, since the poetry deliberately requires me to use my own life to make sense of the abstractions, the text becomes a mirror for what’s in my own head. One of the great fears of reading difficult poetry like this is, I think, the fear of getting it wrong and exposing what exists only in our own heads when we discuss the work. Timothy Morton lambasted nature writers

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37 That said, I think Hejinian’s outlook here is significantly brighter than Eliot’s, a predecessor text that is also interested in the way language constructs our experiences. As Morton suggests, willfully taking on space and nonidentity results in increased comfort in discomfort and solidarity, not overwhelming alienation and loss. Eliot’s fragments, though they do prefigure recognition of space, are still more of a bulwark against the monster/an attempt to make place; Hejinian’s truly spatial ecopoetics not only hugs but becomes the monster—and makes monstrous the reader as well. A study related to this one might viably look further back to trace space through earlier work up to postmodernism—perhaps a direction for future research.
who use ecomimesis as a way to reduce this fear by interpreting it for us\textsuperscript{38}, and rightly so.

Having done these close-focus readings of Hejinian’s texts for you, I think this is perhaps the alternate practice to ecomimetic nature writing. The more I see of Hejinian’s text, the more I see only language, but the more I am assured that things exist beyond my linguistic grasp of them. Yet instead of wanting to immediately go out and make place out of that space, reducing its threat to me, I am aware that that fully locking down the nonhuman world is impossible. What’s more, any attempt to do so is also inherently going to limit the possibility of my own language and my own identity. As Morton’s work suggests, to mind the gap is paradoxically to maintain a greater solidarity with the spatial world. To embrace fear, difficult language, and nonidentity is to become less fearful and gain greater fluency in the nonhuman world. The effect of Hejinian’s most estranging work is to recruit readers into resistance cells, where our very lives become sites of potential spatial ecopoetic awareness. May we all soldier bravely and happily on.

\textsuperscript{38}“In sitcoms, canned laughter relieves the audience of the obligation of laughing. Nature writing relieves us of the obligation to encounter non-identity, sometimes called ‘nature,’ the ‘more-than-human,’ the ‘nonhuman.’ Like a daytime chat show, its mode is one of avoidance rather than escapism. The aesthetic, artful, contrived quality of writing is downplayed. Nature writing seems to be a sheer rendering of the real, just as ‘reality TV’ appears to be real (and we all know very well that it is not). Nature writing is a kind of ‘reality writing’ (and we all know very well that it is not)” (Morton 125).
CONCLUSION

LIFE IN A SPATIAL WORLD

In the face of environmental crisis, it can be difficult to suggest that now is the time to do something as seemingly irrelevant and elitist as rereading experimental poetry that, after all, does not even take the scene of crisis as its overt subject. In the middle of a fight, how can any of this matter? But because there are areas in which traditional activism fails, we need to find a way of thinking and interacting with the world, and doing that requires looking through our own literary history to find alternatives that allow us to establish new identities and new relationships with the nonhuman world. It is my hope that my work here can become part of this overall project of updating ecopoetics and ecopoetic language, creating other possible personal, political, and social goals than traditional environmental activism and traditional narrative poetic practices.

To this end, throughout this text I have resisted reading “nature” poems even when those poems exist in my writers’ work. While it is certainly possible to reread these writers’ poems about typically “natural” subjects spatially, I want to avoid reinscribing the trees/ecocritique or activism/mourning connections. This is not to say that we should not do ecocritique of tree poems, but rather that we should be reading all poems ecocritically. It is so easy to fall into reading habits that reify the idea that environment stops at the edge of the city, or that environment must inherently be about toxicity narratives, and so on. To learn a new relationship to space requires learning to think in terms environment even when there are no environmental shibboleths present. I also want to avoid reinscribing the “salvation” version of environmental awareness/activism. I am particularly sympathetic to Timothy Morton’s suggestion that one of the primary responsibilities of ecocriticism is to help humans forget the dream of returning to a
“clean” world, which is no longer possible if indeed it ever was the case, and learn to experience greater fidelity to and even a fierce type of joy in the world which we actually have, not necessarily either despite or because of anthropogenic change, but just because it is here. While Morton doesn’t really go into it in detail, I think that one of the most valuable things his work does, by asking us to take on a “goth” aesthetic, is push us to stop thinking about the environment as if it were a broken cup that could be fixed or an ailing child that needed to be cured. Instead, Morton asks us to take on the state of the world as it is, to bind our identity to the nonhuman. Instead of finding a cure for an illness, we need to learn to learn to live inside this reality. By pushing ecopoetics into space and by insisting on posthuman identity, strangely, perhaps we can end the paralysis produced by endless mourning and instead realize the personal and aesthetic potential in who and where we are.

To that end, I want ecopoetics to engage poets and poetics that are even less overtly about “nature” even as they vividly engage location and see what value can be found there. And certainly it is true that people are doing excellent work in these directions. Jonathan Skinner’s ecopoetics provides a ground for a huge variety of ecocritical stances and projects. Experimental poetics panels are becoming more and more common features of the biennial ASLE conference. Bonnie Costello’s Shifting Ground does excellent work on landscapes in Ashbery, a reading that I think spatial thinkers will be very sympathetic to. Joshua Corey has just edited a new collection called The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral which, like his avant-pastoral essay, promises to push the pastoral trope in productive directions congruent with both experimental poetics and ecocritical theory. It is these types of projects which are slowly transforming the ecopoetic field from a very traditional body of work based on place, nature, and activism, into something that resists these once useful, but now outgrown, gestures.
There is also more room to extensively reread the poetic canon and find work, both new and old, that posits spatial relationships to the nonhuman world. While this is just one example among many possibilities, one such poet that I would like to re-engage is Mark Strand, whose work seems to have intense spatial resonances and should be read ecocritically. Strand is such a poet of absence and awareness that I feel it would be remiss not to explore the work he does. While certainly his language usage and form is far less experimental than the poets I’ve highlighted in the main body of this dissertation, he is often very ready to question human identity and the way we relate to our surroundings. “The Prediction” (Ramazani 262), for example, is a great bait-and-switch that begins like something traditional, a love poem about a tryst maybe, but then rapidly shifts into something else. Suddenly the poem shifts to the future and death: “rain falling on her husband’s grave, rain falling / on the lawns of her children, her own mouth / filling with cold air, strangers moving into her house” (lines 6-8). But the future is present; the last stanza is about “a man in her room writing a poem, the moon drifting into it” (9) as it did in the first line of this poem. The woman in the poem is “thinking of death, / thinking of him thinking of her” (10). The relationships between these people, real or not, blur together as the logic of the poem loosens: if the man in the room is the poet, is he also her husband since it is “her” room? Is it only “her” room because the writer is imagining this fictional woman at the moment? Or is the poet one of the strangers who has moved into her house? The poem ends with “the wind rising / and taking the moon and leaving the paper dark” (11-12). Refusing to answer questions, the poem is a cute gimmick poem about the reality of a written/read world versus the reality of a tangible concrete world; of course, both the woman and the poet live in a fictional world for the readers, even though we know that someone did at some point really write this poem. But while it is possible to dismiss this poem as kind of a cute Matrix gesture, the way
in which the poem brings up the problem of mimesis and then leaves us with just the dark sheet of paper is a suggestion in favor of constructed world. The poem, after all, is not “Exploring Reality” or something like that, but “A Prediction,” a guess. The poem leaves us with the sort of hollow feeling that all our experiences are just as much predictions as this poem: everything is a construct. Language cannot perform mimesis. In the aftermath of this poem, how am I different from the woman or the man? What is it I do when I read? This seems particularly interesting to me because he’s managed to create this effect without experimental language or technique; it is much easier to mind the gap when the poetry itself is visibly full of gaps.

What is perhaps Strand’s best-known poem is also available for ecopoetic review, particularly in that it gets us to think about location, space, environment, and our relationship to the world without actually containing anything that we typically associate with environmental poetry. Of course I’m talking about his “Keeping Things Whole” (Ramazani 2 621) here, a poem with a title that delivers on its promise in a very different way than we might expect. Opening with “In a field / I am the absence / of field” (lines 1-3). It is an interesting gesture to start a poem about wholeness by declaring oneself separate from it, and in the opposite way in which that thought usually comes: instead of the nonhuman being Not-Me, the speaker is Not-That. This alienation is “always the case” (5), he says, “Wherever I am / I am what is missing” (6-7). This cuts two ways; since a body takes up volume that would otherwise be occupied by whatever else might exist in that location, from the point of view of everything else, there’s a human-shaped hole in the world, and this is true for every moment of time that the human exists. From another perspective, this is a deeply platial statement, as in order for a location to be a “where,” there must be a human to define it and make it place. Once something is a place, if the human element is taken out, then it is no longer place, so in any wherever, humans are the
thing that creates the landscape that is yet missing from the landscape by dint of not being a part of it. The next stanza introduces movement, change:

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body’s been. (8-13)

The sense of alienation is at first strong in this stanza, as the speaker seems so apart from the air: he parts it, it heals itself behind him, but he is definitely a thing apart, the human-shaped hole in the world. But the movement is itself an interaction and an overlapping in the place-sense; the “space / where my body’s been,” clearly now a place as the speaker thinks of it in human-shape, is now filled with air. There is no suggestion that the place-ness of the location disappears when the human moves—it is simply full of air now instead of full of human, with the air itself taking on platial qualities despite being both invisible and nearly intangible. The final stanza continues this ambiguity:

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole. (14-17)

A sudden “we” is a surprising confusion, particularly given the line break. “We” the speaker and the reader? The speaker and the air, or the field, or everything? The universal “we,” everyone that exists, and maybe everything else as well? The sudden implication of everything in the poem as a changeable thing, something that might have reasons, is a little alarming in this scene of hostility and alienation. That tension is resolved by the final reassurance that the speaker’s reason for moving is “to keep things whole,” which has a very different sense here than it does at the beginning of the poem. It is odd to hear the juxtaposition of the ideas of moving and
keeping, since one seems to imply “away” and the other “here,” but this all makes sense. In this poem, place and space are in constant tension, each always present in every line of this poem. Place happens when human presence transforms geography into a “where;” space happens because of constant awareness of the way in which we do not have access to an unconstructed nonhuman and are in fact locked inside our own skulls. The effect is astonishing, alienating and conciliatory all at once. The suggestion of the poem is that the tension of place and space is what the totality of existence is like, and that is why this poem, in all its duality and alienation, successfully keeps things whole. This poem is about as far from mimetic ekphrasis as a poem can get, and yet, it is profoundly “environmental” in a way few poems can be.

In terms of new poetics, one writer I like to read ecocritically is Matthea Harvey, whose fairytale-like prose poems are a bit reminiscent of the surrealism of writers like Russell Edson. “Implications for Modern Life,” which is the introductory poem to Modern Life and thus inflects everything that follows, is a sort of weird fairy-tale dream on the surface, but also serves as an investigation of the relationship we have with both narrative and the nonhuman world. This poem reads like the B-horror movie version of a pastoral scene. It opens with the image of ham flowers. The speaker is disturbed by a meaty world, and chooses to “deny all connection with the ham flowers, the barge floating by loaded with lard, the white flagstones like platelets in the blood-red road” (Harvey 3). The meat-world image is hugely gross, and triggers the speaker to promise to protect animals, fix gates, burn seeds so the wind can’t blow them away: caretaking or orderly gestures that seem to try to make up for the grossness of the meat. “But then I see a horse lying on the side of the road and think You are sleeping, you are sleeping, I will make you be sleeping. But if I didn’t make the ham flowers, how can I make him get up? I made the ham flowers” (3). This is an interesting statement about text: in the context of this prose poem, the
writer, who is of course responsible for making us look at ham flowers, is suddenly present and admits what she’s done. But if she had control, why is there something in the text that she apparently does not like and cannot just delete? The poem suggests that text and language are not entirely in our control, meaning that sometimes we will have to deal with unintentional consequences of language use. The poem continues “Get up, dear animal. Here is your pasture flecked with pink, your oily river, your bleeding barn. Decide what to look at and how. If you lower your lashes, the blood looks like mud. If you stay, I will find you fresh hay” (3). And that’s the end of the poem. The first usage of “you” seems pretty safely connected with the horse, but by the time we get to “Decide what to look at and how,” I am no longer so sure the speaker is talking to a horse—or maybe not so sure about what I am, as humans certainly are a very specific type of animal, and in this poem, at this point, I am the one deciding what to look at from what’s been given me. Am I the horse? What does the writer think she’s doing to me? Or wait, what am I doing to myself when I read—did I just make myself a (maybe dead) horse? The poem is ambiguous and refuses to really confirm identity here: is the speaker the writer, or just a generic speaker? Who is being addressed and why? The language of this poem is significantly destabilizing and questioning in a way that’s a lot like Hejinian’s, and with a lot of the same effects.

The title of this poem says it’s about modern life, and certainly it’s a very physical poem about the way we construct, consume, or do violence to the rest of the world, and challenging us to re-evaluate our relationship to it. We see animals as alive (calves, ravens), dead (the horse), and food (ham, lard), showing us the process by which we literally consume animals and thus metaphorically consume the world. The world itself takes on fleshy characteristics to advance this, as in the blood road, the oily river, the bleeding barn. As the reader takes on animal
characteristics (and after all, I’m made of meat too) and the speaker worries about what s/he’s responsible for in this world, the poem’s pastoral-horror-movie makes us question the ways in which modern life is a process of consumption of or violence to both other humans and the nonhuman world. The fairytale language of it, both fanciful but simple, is deliberately unreal in order to intensify the spatial world that lurks behind the writing: all the actual locations, animals, and people that we can’t see because of our own constructs, our own wishes that our language/thoughts can create the world we’d rather have (“I will make you be sleeping”). The idea that if we stay, the writer will take care of us or give us a treat is both tempting and ominous, hope about language or a lie about how we use the world. That two large sections of this volume are also given over to a commentary on America’s peculiar relationship to terrorism, violence, and landscape lends a bit more weight to the uneasy relationship with an unknowable world in this opening poem. The volume also has a nice series of poems about “Robo-Boy,” a robot who gains consciousness, and while they are cute and sweet, they also do interesting identity work in light of the opening poem. The implications for modern life, in other words, are ambiguous and problematic. While not overtly environmental, the Harvey’s work is nevertheless able to challenge identity and location in ways that are open to ecocritical readings.

It is in this manner that I think poets like Strand and Harvey are hugely useful for a spatial ecopoetic project. While not overtly “environmental” poems or poets, they are certainly available as a way to look at the human/nonhuman relationship, with an emphasis on constructedness and identity, and can broaden the ecopoetic canon beyond simple “nature” or activist poems and claims about the world. Broadening ecopoetry by inviting writers from different traditions also offers readers of disparate tastes and reading styles entry into thinking about ecocriticism. By including poets and poetry that are spatial and that are not overtly
“environmental” in the ecopoetics canon, I think it is more likely that “environment” will join race, class, sex, and sexuality on the list of concerns already automatically at play in every text, and which we teach our students to think about whenever they open a book or a browser window.

Hopefully this dissertation has done at least some of the work of answering the question “so what are these poems good for?” that I began with. Spatial awareness can help writers becoming increasingly aware of the way language works, readers who feel alienated by traditional conceptions of the world and placemaking narratives, and humans aware that the nonhuman world is increasingly toxic and degraded but for whom traditional environmentalism, particularly the kind based on either stable location or salvation/”clean” narratives, is ineffective. It can evade the problems of traditional place-based poetics and strategies. It can incorporate a much wider body of language and language theory while at the same time not disconnecting poetry from a lived experience of the world. In short, it is in space and its accompanying language and identities that posthumans can find a way to live in a postnatural world.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

EDUCATION

Ph.D., Literature, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL (Expected Summer 2013)
  Dissertation Director: Andrew Epstein
  Committee: Paul Outka (Kansas University), Leigh Edwards, Frederick Davis, Eric
  Walker
  Posthumans Navigate a Postnatural World”

M.F.A., Poetry, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, August 2007
  Thesis Advisor: James Kimbrell
  Thesis: “Sequent Introduction”

B.A. Concordia College, Moorhead, MN, June 2004
  Majors: English/Creative Writing, Philosophy
  Minor: French
  Grendel,” “The Working Side of the Weave: Merleau-Ponty and Embodied
  Writing”

Academic interests: 20th century American poetry, ecocriticism, science fiction

PUBLICATIONS

“Harry Harrison,” “Jean Toomer,” “Make Room! Make Room!” and “Moby-Dick.”
  Encyclopedia of the Environment in American Literature. Ed. Geoff Hamilton and Brian
“Interview with Matthea Harvey.” The Southeast Review Online. The Florida State University.
“Interview with April Ossmann.” The Southeast Review Online. The Florida State University. 6
Poems published in The Wabash Review, Parting Gifts, Poetry Motel, and Afterwork

PRESENTATIONS

“‘Crashing Consequity’: Indeterminate Poetic Self and the Nonhuman.” American
  Society for Literature of the Environment National Conference. Bloomington, IL. June
  2011.
“Roundtable Discussion: Pedagogy.” The Nature of the Contradiction. Thirteenth Annual
“Literary GPS: Ecopoetics of the Everyday.” Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present
“The Hyperreal Book Age: Information Machines, Non-Book Books, and Baudrillard.”
  Graduate Student Colloquium. Florida State University. Tallahassee, FL. 31 March
  2008.
Chaired Panel “Horror Host: ‘Next Victim, Preferably Female, Please!’” at PCAS/ACAS Regional Conference, 6 Oct 2006.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY, SUMMER 2004-PRESENT

Graduate Teaching Assistant: Responsible for preparing, teaching, and grading the following courses:
ENC1101: Freshman Rhetoric and Composition.
ENC1102: Freshman Writing and Research.
ENC1142: Freshman Imaginative Writing About Self and Mind.
ENC1145: Research Writing about Self and Mind.
LIT2020: Introduction to the Short Story: Science Fiction.
LIT2030: Introduction to American Poetry.
LIT2081: Introduction to Contemporary Environmental Literature.
CRW3311: Poetic Technique.
AML3041: American Literature Since 1875: Legacy of Whitman.

Assisted Dr. Ned Stuckey-French’s AML4121: The 20th Century American Novel. Responsible for guiding online discussion board, teaching The Great Gatsby, and grading assorted papers and assignments.

Reading/Writing Center Tutor: Responsible for both regularly scheduled and walk-in clients in a one-on-one tutoring format. Includes revising writing from first-year essays through doctoral dissertations, teaching reading or study skills, teaching non-native English speakers, and guiding specific exam preparations.

Digital Studio Tutor: Tutored individual students in digital or multimedia composition projects. Most commonly-taught programs: MS Word; Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign; Wix; Prezi; and Windows Movie Maker.

CONCORDIA COLLEGE, SEPTEMBER 2001-MAY 2004

Reading/Writing Center Tutor: Responsible for tutoring both walk-in clients and regularly-scheduled appointments in a one-on-one tutoring format. Included revising undergraduate essays, teaching non-native English speakers, and teaching reading or study skills.
Centennial Scholar Teaching Grant: 2003-2004. Visited high-school classrooms to teach Socratic-style philosophy and critical thinking; wrote and compiled texts to use as introductory philosophy reader.

AWARDS AND SERVICE

Awarded Edward H. and Marie C. Kingsbury Award, which provided tuition, teaching release, and stipend for the 2012-2013 academic year.
Assisted with the editing of Perspectives on the Short Story, 2nd ed. Forthcoming from Pearson Learning Solutions.
Awarded special distinction for outstanding performance on PhD preliminary exams
Poetry Staff, The Southeast Review, September 2004-present
Served as mentor to an entering Graduate Teaching Assistant, Summer 2006
Nominated for FSU First-Year Writing Graduate Teaching Assistant Award, 2006
Graduated Magna cum Laude from Concordia College
Awarded Centennial Scholar Teaching Grant, Concordia College, 2003
Omicron Delta Kappa Member
CREDO Honor Student (Concordia College)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Society for Literature of the Environment, 2011-present
Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, 2009-2010
American Culture Association of the South, 2006-2007
Popular Culture Association of the South, 2006-2007
Popular Culture Association, 2006