

University of Nevada, Reno

**Unnatural Eco poetics:  
Unlikely Spaces in Contemporary Poetry**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
English

by

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## ABSTRACT

The shift toward and identification of what I am calling *unnatural ecopoetics* represents an important development for ecopoetics and more broadly for ecocriticism—first, through broader applicability of ecopoetic theory and second, through increased clarity surrounding the term ecopoetics. The identification and detailed breakdown of the central tenets of both early ecopoetics and the unnatural ecopoetics I am espousing here helps stabilize a field that has long been afflicted with conflicting definitions and understandings. Since its inception, the lack of clarity inherent within the term ecopoetics has been surprisingly detrimental to the field’s expansion. I propose defining ecopoetics as a theoretical lens that studies the methods by which poets attempt to express the material and nonmaterial elements of real-world environmental experience, including subjective elements of that encounter, through poetic form and language. Put another way, ecopoetics investigates how poets attempt to use unique forms to capture the multiple elements that constitute lived experience while simultaneously foregrounding the textual space in which such expression occurs. Rather than separating the material world from nonmaterial aspects of experience, this understanding of the term ecopoetics focuses on the ways in which individual memory, personal experience, ideology, and the limitations of the senses shape experience and, just as importantly, on how new forms and experimentation with language can work to expose the agential power of the material and nonmaterial worlds alike. Unnatural ecopoetics employs experimental forms and self-reflexive commentary to express the disjointed and nonlinear aspects of experience while simultaneously moving the inherent limitations of the text to the fore. By continuing to move the definition of ecopoetics forward in this way, I not only expand the applicability of ecopoetic theory across literary studies and gain a more diverse understanding of the ways in which people from a variety of economic situations, cultures, locations, and ethnic backgrounds understand and interact with their environments, but also acknowledge the ways in which nature and culture are irreversibly intertwined.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction: What is Eco-poetics? .....	1
Chapter One: Natural Cultural Environments and Wasted Language in A.R. Ammons's <u>Garbage</u> .....	29
Chapter Two: From Perception to Text in Lyn Hejinian's <u>My Life</u> .....	68
Chapter Three: "The Uncertain Truth of Fiction": Unlikely Environments in Susan Howe's <u>The Midnight</u> .....	102
Chapter Four: The Eco-poetics of Found Text and Textual Space in Kenneth Goldsmith's <u>Seven American Deaths and Disasters</u> .....	136
Conclusion: The Future of Eco-poetics in New Poetries and New Spaces .....	171

**LIST OF FIGURES**

- 1: Robert Grenier's drawn poem, "moon / letters / page"
- 2: Robert Grenier's drawn poem, "A Natural / Language / couldn't / be"
- 3: Robert Grenier's drawn poem, "water / at nigh / t"
- 4: Patrick Haemmerlein's mixed media work, "Your All Just Feathers in My Nest"

## INTRODUCTION

### WHAT IS ECOPOETICS?

It's my lunch hour, so I go  
for a walk among the hum-colored  
cabs. First, down the sidewalk  
where laborers feed their dirty  
glistening torsos sandwiches  
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets  
on. They protect them from falling  
bricks, I guess. Then onto the  
avenue where skirts are flipping  
above heels and blow up over  
grates. The sun is hot, but the  
cabs stir up the air. I look  
at bargains in wristwatches. There  
are cats playing in sawdust.

-Frank O'Hara

In his 1964 poem, "A Step Away from Them,"<sup>i</sup> Frank O'Hara poeticizes the banal experience of his lunch hour in an urban environment. For the speaker, the walk brings encounters with the mundane happenings of the city, including everything from "hum-colored / cabs" to workers drinking "Coca-Cola." The poem's speaker engages with the wholly constructed and intensely cultural environment in which he walks and reveals the environmentality of the urban space. The setting of the poem is almost entirely unnatural in its lack of traditional images of the natural world, yet the space is familiar, homely,



and even a natural home to the speaker, who expresses the urban space in the comfortable and familiar rhythm of everyday speech, a informality that is reflected in the poem's free verse. The poem's expression of everyday life in the contemporary city occurs through images of lived experience, including material and culturally significant objects that are man-made, industrial, and even frivolous ("the sidewalk," "Coca-Cola," "yellow helmets," "heels," "grates," "cabs," and "wristwatches") alongside musings over the poet's real-world personal hardships, extra-textual references, and metapoetic implications of the poem's struggle to express the world.<sup>ii</sup> The poem's setting is unnatural but drawing the experience of that place into a self-aware textual space reveals the naturalcultural elements that shape the poet's encounter with the city. By drawing naturecultures into a text that exposes and even foregrounds the multifaceted environmentality brought on by material and nonmaterial objects, places, thoughts, feelings, connections, and histories, the poem's textual space shows that environmental experiences are always naturalcultural and grants the material world agency in shaping that space.

With its paucity of traditional natural elements and its focus on human cultural objects and personal sentiments, "A Step Away from Them" would not typically be read eco poetically. However, I present O'Hara's poem as an example of how to read through a critical lens I call unnatural eco poetics. Unnatural eco poetics emerges from Donna Haraway's new materialist concept of "naturecultures"<sup>iii</sup> and builds on the growing movement toward material ecocriticism, both of which propose a breakdown of recognizable boundaries between natural and human spaces, objects, thoughts, and agencies. Unnatural eco poetic techniques use open and often extra-poetic forms and self-

reflexive commentary on the failures of words to accurately express material reality in order to foreground naturecultures within the distinctly textual space created by the poem, a space where the agentic power of the material and nonmaterial worlds are revealed as equals. I use the term material throughout this dissertation as a way of pointing to the breakdown of boundaries between nature and culture, where “material” stands in for all physical objects and places, whether man-made or occurring naturally in the world. “Nonmaterial,” on the other hand, points to the invisible emotional, historical, political, and personal elements that influence the speaker’s experience of space and translation of it to the textual space of the poem. The material and nonmaterial come together in a new space—a textual space. Drawing from Edward Soja, the textual space that I identify is a kind of “thirdspace,” where the dichotomy between subjective and objective interpretations of materiality breaks down.<sup>iv</sup> Textual space is created when a text is forthcoming about its own constructedness and makes those limitations apparent on the page through formal experimentation, extra-textual references, or metapoetic commentary. The location of a textual space is fundamental to the critical lens of unnatural ecopoetics because it is within that self-reflexive space that naturecultures can be made visible and influential.

Reading O’Hara’s poem through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, reveals a textual space in which the multiple material and nonmaterial elements of experience are exposed. Marking the beginning of what he terms his “‘I do this, I do that’ poems,”<sup>v</sup> the poet’s musing over the material sites and sounds of the city infuses physical space into the speaker’s subjective experience of it. Entirely absent of traditional images of wild nature, the poem provides a glimpse of an experience in the world that acknowledges

how physical elements are perceived by the human speaker with the influence of cultural, personal, and textual forces. The text complicates the speaker's walk in his material surroundings by integrating his observations with his analysis ("They protect them from falling / bricks, I guess") and referencing extra-textual information. Later in the same poem, the speaker refers to three deaths that dramatically affected the poet: "Bunny [Lang] died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock" (O'Hara, Lunch Poems 16). In a similar moment, the final lines reveal a self-reflexivity to the poem that emerges from a connection to the fragmentation and disjointedness of cubist and surrealist styles: "My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy" (O'Hara, Lunch Poems 17).<sup>vi</sup> Referencing Reverdy and his cubist interest in multiple perspectives, the poem's seemingly simple list of events is complicated by other perspectives, which shape the speaker's experience. "A Step Away from Them" is built on a form of direct transcription of lived experience<sup>vii</sup> to the page, in which the speaker moves between his individual observations, encounters, movements, and thoughts in the order in which he encounters them on his walk. The poet's direct transcription of his encounters and thoughts to the page creates a textual depiction of his naturalcultural environmental experience.

Unnatural eco-poetics reveals that despite the lack of natural elements in O'Hara's poem, it meaningfully engages the physical, cultural, and personal elements of environment within its textual space. When pushed further, though, unnatural eco-poetics also reveals that O'Hara's poem attributes agency to the material forces around the speaker by revealing the power of "skirts" to flip and "blow," cabs to "stir up the air" and, later in the poem, for the "sign" of Times Square to "blow smoke" and for "everything" to "honk" (O'Hara, Lunch Poems 15-6). By recognizing how nonhuman elements act within

the textual space, unnatural ecopoetics emphasizes poetry's unique suitability in identifying how material and nonmaterial elements alike shape real-world experience and thus demonstrates the "distributive agency" sought by material ecocriticism.

I begin with O'Hara for two reasons—first, "A Step Away from Them" exemplifies the variety of ecopoetry that I explore in this dissertation, as this new lens identifies and elucidates understandings of texts that express materiality as naturalcultural; second, O'Hara's poem, although it initially appears to be a simple transcription, foregrounds the gap between lived experience and textual expressions of it by employing unique formal structures and self-reflexive language that reveals its own textuality. Further, my reading of "A Step Away from Them" is directly indicative of how I am reading the work of A.R. Ammons, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, and Kenneth Goldsmith, four poets who are unlikely choices for most ecopoetic critiques because of the dominance of unnatural elements in their work. However, I argue that despite the lack of traditional nature in the work of these twentieth- and twenty-first-century poets, many of their poems express environmentalism more accurately than their counterparts who are widely considered to be ecopoets. I take the term "environmentalism" from Lawrence Buell, who uses it to refer to environmental experiences that are infused with the influence of personal and cultural elements.<sup>viii</sup> In other words, environmentalism encapsulates the interconnections of material and nonmaterial elements within experience. By accentuating the material and nonmaterial factors of environmentalism and stressing the inherent gap between language and reality, the poems in this dissertation present what I identify as an unnatural ecopoetics.

My work on unnatural ecopoetics builds on previous understandings of the term

“ecopoetics” and expands its usefulness beyond texts that contain overtly natural images in order to account for contemporary poems that are responding to changes in how space is conceptualized. While conventional definitions of ecopoetics—which generally rise from the work of John Elder, Leonard Scigaj, J. Scott Bryson, and Jonathan Bate, who present ecopoetics as mimetic and often activist in its sentiments—tie the term to the natural world and seek to express it as accurately as possible through language and form, they do not account for technological and social shifts toward fewer physical and natural spaces and toward more digital and built sites. In more recent conceptions of the term, however, such a shift is beginning to become more pronounced. My work extends that of Brenda Iijima and Scott Knickerbocker, who have moved conceptions of ecopoetics away from entirely natural environments as they begin to emphasize the ways in which ecopoetics can enhance understandings of poetry on built spaces, often without much connection to traditional ideas of nature. These critics, though, are limited in their engagement with these new spaces, only giving them limited time in their criticism and hinging their discussions on minute natural presences, often a contaminated or fraught natural element, in the urban world.

I present the concept of unnatural ecopoetics as an alternative to models that remain tied, however minutely, to the natural. My unnatural ecopoetic methodology recognizes that environments are complex spaces, composed not only of things but also context, experience, and language. The human experience of a space is partly nonmaterial and utterly subjective, based entirely upon the observer’s position, memory, aesthetic preference, attentiveness, while also hinging on material factors of objects, weather, movement, and the presence of other beings. Unnatural ecopoetics recognizes textual

spaces that have the flexibility necessary to account for material and nonmaterial elements of experience. While the word “unnatural” often has negative connotations in ecocriticism, I do not use the word disparagingly but instead as a symbol of the state of contemporary life. Inspired by an age shaped by urban infrastructure and relentless technological influences, my use of the term “unnatural” recognizes the unlikely environments that arise in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century literature as a result of the changes within conceptualizations of space. In a sense, this new brand of eco-poetics is unnatural in its illegitimacy; it has no claim to an origin in natural sentiments or forms. Its ecological<sup>ix</sup> system is markedly human, but an unnatural eco-poetics moves beyond only considering natural elements but includes all material and nonmaterial aspects of the environment.

The movement away from traditional ideas of nature and toward an acknowledgment of the complex environmentality that is pivotal in unnatural eco-poetics rises not only from recent ecocriticism, which unlike most eco-poetics has demonstrated theoretical interest in environments entirely beyond nature, but also from theories of the new materialisms, which posit a movement away from restrictive conceptions of nature and the breakdown of identifiable boundaries between the human body and the rest of the world. As my term extends from ecocriticism, Timothy Morton’s ideas in Ecology Without Nature (2007) are of particular relevance to my own movement of eco-poetics away from rigid conceptions of nature. Morton proposes a theory of “ambient poetics, [which is] a materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription—if there is such a thing—the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader” (emphasis in

original; Morton 3).<sup>x</sup> Although Morton is particularly attuned to the reader's influence on the text in a way I am not, my concept of unnatural eco-poetics builds on his push to recognize how text affects form, and moves beyond its limit on the page into the "physical and social" environment around it. Extending Morton, I analyze texts that demonstrate a cognizance of the profound influence of human culture and subjectivity on environmental experience. In engaging developments in ecocritical theory alongside eco-poetic theory, this dissertation reveals that eco-poetics is useful in understanding not only how natural aspects of a space are expressed in text, but also the multiple levels of natural-cultural spaces.

The ideas of unnatural eco-poetics are best suited to contemporary texts because contemporary poets do not live in a world where nature is distinguishable from culture, where language is distinct from literature, or where the digital is decipherable from the real. These categories have broken down with the increasing move toward the city and corresponding corrosion of wild spaces, the rise of the information age, and the prominence of technologies that alter and increase the variety of ways that individuals can experience the world. This dissertation will build on recent work in eco-poetics to address how social changes have irreversibly altered conceptions of the "eco," changing the meaning of eco-poetics to reflect the increasingly unnatural state of contemporary life. Specifically, unnatural eco-poetics offers a critical lens that focuses on the methods by which poets express non-material cultural, historical, political, and personal elements of environmental experience alongside material objects and spaces through self-reflexive language and experimental forms, which foreground textual spaces where multiple elements are shown to shape environmentality. Following recent trends in ecocritical

theory to think of nature as interconnected within other aspects of space and experiences within it, my conceptualization of unnatural eco-poetics focuses on the ways in which individual memory, personal experience, ideology, and the limitations of the senses play a role in how individuals experience material elements of the world and, just as importantly, on how new forms and experimentation with language can work to express these facets of experience. What I intend to do in this dissertation, then, is to push eco-poetics to its limits by deploying the lens of unnatural eco-poetics in unlikely poetic spaces. By theorizing and clarifying the characteristics of eco-poetics, this dissertation will help to solidify understandings of the field and ultimately enhance its usefulness to scholars both within ecocriticism and beyond by demonstrating that the foregrounded influence of naturecultures within the textual space of contemporary experimental poetry can express various agential powers that highlight the influence of both material and nonmaterial forces in human experience.

### **Eco-poetics and New Ecocritical Theory**

Since its inception, the term eco-poetics has remained somewhat amorphous and thus difficult to define and apply. Many scholars define the term, but their conceptions of eco-poetics vary widely and are sometimes directly contradictory. The undefined character of the term is clearly summarized in Timothy Clark's 2011 book, The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment, when he contends that "the term ecopoetry still has an opportunistic feel" and claims that often "'ecopoetry' does just mean work with a vaguely green message" (emphasis in original; 139-40). Stemming from popular environmental literary and social trends, many scholars and poets view



ecopoetics and ecopoetry as involved in politicized movements to make poetry relevant to current real-world concerns, often without much or any recognition of the theory behind the term ecopoetics. To some degree, this lack of consensus falls between two terms that are often viewed as synonyms—ecopoetry and ecopoetics. Despite their often interchangeable use throughout ecocritical scholarship, I argue that these terms have followed quite different paths as the term ecopoetry has come to refer to poetry that engages with environments for the sake of political and social action while the term ecopoetics is a methodology or theoretical lens that considers the nuances of how environmental experiences are expressed on the page. Even within the term ecopoetics, though, applications of it are diverse; it is sometimes used to describe a poem's engagement in political expressions of problems in the natural environment and other times recognizes how "nature" can be expressed through nontraditional language and forms. Regardless of the variations in its definition, ecopoetics generally tends to involve analyzing how poems move beyond idealized interactions with the physical world and begin to represent nature for its own inherent value and autonomous self.

For two decades, scholars like John Elder, Jonathan Bate, Leonard Scigaj, Angus Fletcher, Jonathan Skinner, Jed Rasula, J. Scott Bryson, and Scott Knickerbocker, among many others, have wrestled with the definition of ecopoetics. While the definitions of ecopoetics promoted by these scholars have yet to reach any clear consensus, leaving the term in murky territory and difficult to apply, each conceptualization of the term yields new insights and directions for ecopoetic studies. Initially, the concept of ecopoetics began with examinations of the struggles faced by contemporary nature poets; early studies such as John Elder's Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature (1985)

and Jonathan Bate's The Song of the Earth (2000), which coined the term "ecopoetry," began to consider the specifics of what makes a poem an ecopoem but did little to distinguish the field from the more general category of nature poetry.<sup>xi</sup> As a result, some scholars use the term ecopoetry synonymously with the general term nature poetry and others have defined it as a more theoretical practice.<sup>xii</sup>

The conflicting directions of these early definitions are only a sample of the many disparate directions of ecopoetic theory within the United States.<sup>xiii</sup> The common themes in these definitions are that early ecopoetic theory is closely tied to traditional ideas of nature and that it is not inclusive of the personal, historical, political, and technological elements that contribute to environmental experience. In recent ecopoetic theory, though, scholars are re-conceptualizing early ecopoetics to more closely respond to the concerns of contemporary poets, who engage with new challenges brought on by an increasingly technological, global, and urban environment. The stark social shifts faced by contemporary poets demand new modes of examining how environments are expressed poetically. As Ursula Heise writes in Sense of Place, Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global (2008), "the future cannot be symmetrical with the past because economic, demographic, and ecological conditions have changed in such a way that radical new forms of social organization are required" (86). As scholars recognize that the world has changed, so too must they conceptualize a change in ecopoetics. It is in the wake of this shift that I consider unnatural ecopoetics, which accounts for the physical, cultural, technological, and social shifts that have occurred in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by acknowledging the breakdown of the nature / culture binary and emphasizing a textual space where the effect of material and nonmaterial

elements of experience can be revealed.

Changes within ecopoetics, which have been coming for some time, are prominent in recent studies but can be seen even in some early work. Arguably, the movement toward a new era of ecopoetics began in the pages of Ecopoetics, a journal edited by Jonathan Skinner in which definitions of ecopoetry and ecopoetics have been discussed and debated since 2001. Skinner's editorial statement in volume one reveals that concerns over the applicability of ecopoetics extend back a decade and a half, and his statement establishes the differences between the journal's purpose and contemporaneous ecopoetic ideas. He writes that "[t]he developing complexity of perception is technology-induced, but it also arises from our awareness of a web of nearly unquantifiable interrelatedness that increases, ironically, with human fragmentation of that web" (Skinner 6). Put another way, the more humans attempt to disconnect themselves from the physical world or destruct the "web" of "unquantifiable interrelatedness," the more those inescapable interrelations are revealed. The human individual is always connected to the world in complex and often invisible ways. Skinner's statement demonstrates that new ecopoetic ideas do not appear chronologically since some early proponents of ecopoetics, such as Skinner, recognize the complex interrelations of nature and culture alongside experimental forms and thus align more closely with what I identify as unnatural ecopoetics; still, some contemporary proponents of the field are more concerned with traditional ideas of nature and mimetic forms that seek to express them and thus align with traditional ecopoetic ideas. While there is a great deal of overlap in the development of traditional ecopoetics and ideas that I call unnatural ecopoetics, theorizing the more recent era of ecopoetics is directly benefited by contemporary

ecocritical and new materialist theory. With this new theory, eco-poetics fractures into two camps, the traditional and the unnatural—one rooted in first- and second-wave ecocriticism, the other grounded in third- and fourth-wave ecocriticism.<sup>xiv</sup> While the development of eco-poetics has not been a chronological process as in the wave metaphor that is used prominently throughout ecocriticism, positioning the term in relation to ecocritical waves emphasizes the theoretical platforms upon which eco-poetics has and continues to build. By acknowledging the ways eco-poetics has broken into distinct phases we can maintain the political and social power in traditional work while also allowing for a more theoretically situated branch of unnatural eco-poetics.

I propose unnatural eco-poetics as an outgrowth of third and fourth wave ecocriticism because my term elucidates poems where naturecultures are made tangible through overtly textual spaces. However, earlier work, as evidenced by Skinner, begins to gesture toward the movement of eco-poetics away from natural settings and toward new forms. The trend to revise eco-poetics has gathered considerable support since 2008 with the publication of a variety of new books and articles that reconceptualize traditional eco-poetic ideas for the twenty-first century. In 2008 and 2009, a new and long-awaited issue of Skinner's journal *Eco-poetics* appeared after a four-year hiatus and Harriet Tarlo guest edited a special feature on eco-poetics in *How2*, indicating a renewed critical interest in eco-poetic ideas. These volumes provide new forums in which poets and scholars like Skinner, Forrest Gander, and Jane Sprague imagine new directions in the field.<sup>xv</sup> Discussions about eco-poetics were re-opened in these forums, leading to more recent strides toward a clear eco-poetic methodology.

My work on unnatural eco-poetics relies on the contributions of recent eco-poetic

theory that follow the term's resurgence after 2009. Studies like Brenda Iijima's The Ecolanguage Reader<sup>xvi</sup> (2010) and, even more recently, Scott Knickerbocker's Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language (2012) specifically call for ecopoetics to re-think the concept of traditional nature and embrace urban, digital, mental, and textual spaces rather than only physical natural or green spaces.<sup>xvii</sup> Unnatural ecopoetic ideas push further than previous studies as they conceptualize environment differently—in a way that breaks down the nature / culture binary entirely and foregrounds textual space to expose the agency of both material and nonmaterial forces.

My call to view naturecultures and their agential power within the textual space of contemporary poetry is directly facilitated by theoretical movements in the new materialisms and material ecocriticism. In ecocriticism, the turn toward environmental justice ecocriticism in the mid-2000s, which calls for the inclusion of urban environments and human inhabitants rather than only the pristine wilderness focus of early ecocritical studies, and the movement after 2010 toward material ecocriticism, which recognizes the indistinguishable interconnections of nature and human culture, alter the ways in which environments are conceptualized. As such, today ecopoetics is beginning to move away from considering depictions of nature and toward analyzing how experiences of space or environment are directly shaped by both nature and culture. Alongside environmental justice ecocriticism, which broadens understandings of the field to include the human subject, the fusion of new materialism with ecocriticism further expands understandings of the environment by positing that the human body as intertwined with his or her environment. For material ecocriticism, which Scott Slovic identifies as the cornerstone of the field's fourth wave, the challenge in this conceptualization of the human as

intermeshed with the environment demands a more complex discussion of how we perceive the environment.

Material ecocriticism is of particular importance within my concept of unnatural eco-poetics because it posits a collapse of boundaries between the human body and material spaces or objects, allowing a breakdown of purely natural or purely cultural environmental experiences. Still, while my work emerges from concepts in material ecocriticism, unnatural eco-poetics differs from it in its acceptance of the gap between language and reality. While material ecocriticism moves away from the social constructedness of words and toward finding discursive practices that can express the “intra-action” of matter and meaning,<sup>xviii</sup> unnatural eco-poetics looks to resolve that gap by looking specifically at the textual space of the poem, in which text itself becomes a space where such intra-action is possible. Unnatural eco-poetics focuses on how material elements, ranging from a tree to a taxi cab, intertwine with nonmaterial subjective experiences and express agency through the foregrounded textual space. In “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych,” Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino attempt to define the burgeoning field of material ecocriticism. Oppermann posits that in material ecocriticism “the natural and the cultural can no longer be thought as dichotomous categories. Rather, we need to theorize them together, and analyze their complex relationships in terms of their indivisibility and thus their mutual effect on one another” (462-63). In other words, in this branch of ecocriticism, scholars rethink subject/object relationships in order to acknowledge and engage with the “other bodies,” including natural and human material objects and bodies, in the world on a meaningful level. Of particular importance to my project is David Abram’s insistence that language can

emerge from naturecultures. In The Spell of the Sensuous (1996), he writes, “[o]nly by affirming the animateness of perceived things do we allow our words to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world” (56). In recognizing “the animateness of perceived things,” language beings to “emerge” from naturalcultural experience. As with Haraway’s breakdown of the boundaries between nature and culture with her term naturecultures, Abram’s move to affirm “the animateness of things,” makes it impossible to view agency as a uniquely human trait. Rather, as the boundaries between culture and nature break down, and the two worlds intertwine and equalize in the textual space, agency distributes beyond the human and into other aspects of the material world.

As humans acknowledge the agency of non-human and even non-living objects, their conceptions of what environments are become radically altered. The term environment, for many people, is immediately tied to the natural elements of a physical landscape. However, as material ecocriticism challenges traditional boundaries between the human self and everything seemingly outside it, environment moves beyond the “nature is over there” mentality and toward a more interconnected vision of the term. The changing image of environment that follows the new materialisms is evident in Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self (2010), where Stacy Alaimo observes that “understanding the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity. As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty” (20). Here, Alaimo points out that the human body cannot be viewed as separate from everything that surrounds it and instead it

becomes affected and shaped by its environment, thus shifting the traditional power dynamic of humans dominating nature. Material ecocriticism posits that the human body is always engaged with various influences or “networks” that formulate its experience of the world. The human is integrated into the environments he inhabits rather than simply an observer, thus making everything human inherently environmental.

As ecocriticism, and, subsequently, ecopoetics, moves away from a traditional separation of human culture from the physical world and embraces the new materialisms that draw out naturecultures, new types of texts that formally articulate such spaces become relevant. Oppermann claims that texts in this vein “erase the distinction between the discursive and the material, language, and reality” and ultimately, they show that “discourse and matter are inextricably entangled, and they constitute life’s narratives and life itself” (“Diptych” 462). Expressing the dissolution of boundaries between word and world demands the figurative abilities of literary texts. Ultimately, Iovino and Oppermann attribute literature with a unique ability to express the agential promise presented by naturecultures when they claim that “literary stories emerge from the intra-action of human creativity and narrative agency of matter” (Material 8). As scholars like Oppermann and Alaimo, among others, theorize the breakdown of distinct boundaries between the human body and the environment, what is considered “environment” rapidly changes, and, I argue, what constitutes valid poetry for ecopoetics similarly shifts.

I argue that these changes in ecopoetic theory signal a new era of ecopoetics (while still leaving room for important traditional ecopoetic concerns), which emerges out of an age of urbanization and technologization, and which is conceptualized through a theoretical lens that is contemporaneous to the poetry of this period. In this dissertation, I



will illustrate how unnatural ecopoetics is significantly distinct from traditional understandings of the field and not only investigate how this new iteration of the term grows from recent ecopoetic theory but also propose its continued expansion toward increasingly unlikely poetic spaces.

### **Unnatural Ecopoetics**

The distinctions between unnatural ecopoetics and traditional conceptions of the term are evident in the “Editor’s Preface” to The Ecopoetry Anthology (2013), where Ann Fisher-Wirth observes that “ecological poetry is . . . willing to engage with, even play with, postmodern and poststructuralist theories associated with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry<sup>xix</sup> and the avant garde. . . . [but] the risks for ecological poetry include hyperintellectualism and emotional distance or detachment” (xxix). Fisher-Wirth rightly points out the ways in which new ecopoetic theories engage with postmodernism and poststructuralism as represented by developments in the journal Ecopoetics, and, among others, Iijima and Knickerbocker’s books. The emerging engagement of ecopoetic critique with L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry demonstrates the field’s interest in the words themselves rather than just their meanings. Yet, this definition disparages the “hyperintellectualism” of radical experimentation that accompanies such movements. My departure from Fisher-Wirth’s definition is that the movement of unnatural ecopoetics toward “distance or detachment” brought on by self-reflexive language and experimental forms is precisely what allows this new era of ecopoetics to express the kind of naturalcultural environment that was always removed from traditional ecopoetics. In this sense, by embracing its own textuality and demanding

that the reader remains aware of the “distance” between the text and materiality, unnatural ecopoetics exposes how invisible and subjective aspects of environmental experience are intertwined with the material space. By moving into the language and engaging textual space unnatural ecopoetics strives to become truly expressive of the multi-faceted material and nonmaterial elements that compose environments. In this sense, unnatural ecopoetics is centered around preserving the complexity in environments by emphasizing the many elements that compose them.

Unnatural ecopoetics displays two continually evolving characteristics that distinguish it from first-wave conceptions of the term: first, it acknowledges and engages with unnatural physical environments and the various material and nonmaterial elements that constitute them; second, it foregrounds the limitations of language and form. In recent ecopoetic theory, these revelations are dealt with by embracing concepts from language poetry,<sup>xx</sup> which identify language as something meaningful in itself and thus foreground the textual space. Knickerbocker, whose work edges toward unnatural ecopoetics, articulates this shift when he writes that

[Eco]poems undo simple oppositions between humans and nature; sensuous poesis operates from the assumption that humans (and their tools, including language) are both distinct and inseparable from the rest of nature. Rather than attempt to erase the artifice of their own poems (to make them seem more natural and supposedly, then, closer to nature), the poets in this book unapologetically embrace artifice—not for its own sake, but as a way to relate meaningfully to the natural world. Indeed for them, artifice is natural. (2)

Knickerbocker observes that words are inherently artificial and unable to express the physical space accurately. He contends that ecopoetry deals with the problems with language by embracing and foregrounding the “artifice” of the text. When

Knickerbocker's book is put alongside a somewhat similar earlier study, Scigaj's Sustainable Poetry, the distinction between traditional ecopoetics and the movement in recent ecopoetic theory toward what I call unnatural ecopoetics becomes evident. Initially, Knickerbocker's point seems to mirror Scigaj's observation that "[w]ithin ecopoetry . . . language is often foregrounded only to reveal its limitations, and this is accomplished in such a way that the reader's gaze is thrust beyond language back into the less limited world that language refers to" (Scigaj 38). When the two passages are compared, it is clear that both see ecopoets as engaging with the artificiality of language or, put another way, the reality that word and world are unequal. For Scigaj, though, foregrounding the boundaries of language allows the reader to look past its artificiality to the physical space behind it; Knickerbocker, on the other hand, observes that "artifice is natural," implying that the words themselves are tangible, meaningful, and even "natural." While traditional ecopoetics, as represented by Scigaj, engages with text in order to get at the physical space, unnatural ecopoetics builds on Knickerbocker's push toward artifice by embracing text as space and flaunting its textuality.

The term ecopoetics can only move toward the type of self-awareness that Knickerbocker proposes by employing nontraditional forms and self-reflexive language, which distance the text from direct expressions of reality and exaggerates its inevitable subjectivity. In recent scholarship on ecopoetics, though, the experimentalism of much contemporary poetry is questioned as a viable application of the ecopoetic lens. Jill Magi contends in "Ecopoetics and the Adversarial Consciousness: Challenges to Nature Writing, Environmentalism, and Notions of Individual Agency," that "[t]hough ecopoetics might be grounded in literary experimentalism, whose traditions have included a deep

skepticism of traditional grammar, narratives, and ‘telling,’ I believe an eco-poetic stance may be wary of the fixity of that aesthetic and conceptual position” (249). She claims that re-working language is ineffective because such moves are themselves outdated. Even “experimentalism” must be re-thought and redeployed to escape the “fixity” that has been engrained within it. As such, while Magi implies that eco-poetry is a type of literary experimentalism that must constantly reinvent itself to escape “fixity,” Knickerbocker views eco-poetry as something conscious and accepting of its own limitations in expressing lived experience. In my conception of unnatural eco-poetics, both literary experimentalism and self-awareness emerge as tools by which the poem recognizes its own medium. In its awareness of its own limitations, unnatural eco-poetics identifies textual spaces in which nature/cultures are distinctly present and where the material world can claim the agency it is denied in traditional eco-poetics through its influence on the textual space.<sup>xxi</sup>

The poets in this dissertation all engage with unnatural physical environments and emphasize the mediated nature of experiences with the material world through investigations into the limitations of language. Their work acknowledges the subjectivity of experience and the subsequent interrelation of natural and cultural forces within experience, a fusion that is expressed within the textual spaces of their poems. The four chapters build upon one another as they work from the more literal setting of A.R. Ammons’s garbage heap to the figurative space of Goldsmith’s found radio reports. As the chapters work chronologically forward,<sup>xxii</sup> they establish that the uncovering of material and nonmaterial elements of experience in more figurative settings display more clearly the agential power of material elements. While the first chapter demonstrates an intertwining of nature and culture on a physical level through the setting of the trash

heap, a place of literal mingling of nature and culture, the second chapter translates that naturalcultural fusion to experiences of physical space by emphasizing the role of subjectivity and nonmaterial influences on human encounters with the environment. The naturalcultural reality of both setting and experience are foundational to chapter three, in which the influences of nature and culture are central to conceptualizations of language and its ability to express lived experience. Once the influence of naturalcultural forces on language is recognized, chapter four propels that fusion into the form of conceptual poetry, which captures the naturalcultural experience within a deliberately pronounced textual space. I work through one new aspect of unnatural eco-poetics in each chapter, and culminate with a conclusion that points toward new deployments for the unnatural eco-poetic lens in texts that combine all four characteristics.

Chapter one, “NaturalCultural Environments and Wasted Language in A.R. Ammons’s Garbage,” proposes that unnatural eco-poetics allows for renewed interest in a poet who is most often thought of as a traditional eco-poet. In this chapter, I contend that despite the naturalcultural elements of Ammons’s later work, it is often read through the lens of traditional eco-poetics. While many scholars attribute the poet’s late work to the same methodology as his early poems, such as his famous poem “Corsons Inlet,”<sup>xxiii</sup> I argue that interpretations of Ammons’s late poetry as analogous to his early work are challenged with the introduction of unnatural eco-poetics, which emphasizes his movement away from mimesis and toward spaces that complicate the nature/culture binary in his late work.<sup>xxiv</sup> This chapter acknowledges naturalcultural intersections and deepens understandings of the text’s poetics by proposing that although such fusion is present in Garbage, the poem is not primarily interested in the intersections of nature and

culture in the garbage heap but more concerned with how language can express such a fusion. Through the lens of unnatural eco-poetics readers can look at Ammons, a poet whose early work lends itself to traditional eco-poetics in its mimetic language and form, and finally understand how the natural-cultural union in his later work is ultimately tied to his investigation into language's continual re-constitutions and re-emergences. As we begin to better understand why Ammons must examine how language works in order to express a complex environmental experience, we not only gain a better understanding of the poet's meta-poetic commentary but also of the ways in which language must be re-conceptualized in order to express the multifaceted reality of a natural-cultural experience.

Chapter two, "From Perception to Text in Lyn Hejinian's My Life," considers Lyn Hejinian's poetry as an examination of how formal structure and self-reflexivity reveal the natural-cultural elements that constitute experience. Written in prose poetry, without punctuation, and in the unpredictable order of the human mind's wanderings, My Life embodies experience in all of its complications and multiplicities. Since Hejinian's work rarely considers environmental themes and is highly involved in anthropocentric concerns, two traits that are not typical of traditional eco-poetics, her critics regularly place her poetry squarely within the realm of language poetry for her acknowledgment of language as a construction and never in terms of eco-poetry. However, unnatural eco-poetics reveals Hejinian's use of language poetry's methods are central to her acknowledgment that experience is natural-cultural. Although nature is not prominent in My Life, Hejinian's poetry engages with nature-cultures by integrating facets of the personal, material, and textual into a single textual space. For Hejinian, this attempt to express the complex multiplicity and diversity of an environmental experience in text is

accomplished through explorations in forms that can most closely preserve the multifaceted and divergent facets of lived experience and meta-poetic inquiries into how language itself can express it. Not reducing the lived moment to a single perspective, Hejinian's work attempts to maintain the complex, multi-directional, confusing, and unrelated features of one's experience in a particular place and time while simultaneously granting the material agency. Through a search for language that accurately conveys the immediate sensations and multiplicity of experience and her application of that search within her own poetic form, Hejinian participates in a fundamental quest of unnatural ecopoetics—to acknowledge naturecultures and integrate them into a poem that foregrounds its own textual space.

Chapter three, "'The uncertain truth of fiction:' Unlikely Environments in Susan Howe's The Midnight," engages with a highly experimental contemporary poem that seamlessly connects cultural data with personal reflection and physical environment. Examining the fusion of these various elements within the book allows for a better understanding of how unnatural ecopoetics engages just as much with the cultural influences of Howe's Irish heritage and family history as it does with natural ones. The Midnight (2003) brings together various aspects of culture, history, environment, and genealogy in a collage that highlights middle spaces, including the space between the poetry and prose sections of the book, which are themselves new environments for ecopoetic critique. In these spaces, various cultural artifacts intermingle—the original poetry, found text, historical data, images, and meta-poetic commentary on how language functions. Howe explains that in this book she is "assembling materials for a recurrent return somewhere. Familiar sound textures, deliverances, vagabond quotations,

preservations, wilderness shrubs, little resuscitated patterns. Historical or miraculous. Thousands of correlations have to be sliced and spliced” (85). In this sense, the poem is a fusion of the innumerable aspects of experience, including the material and nonmaterial elements of it. The Midnight brings these elements together as it engages in formal and linguistic inquiries into the ability of language to express physical experience as it is infused with culture. Reading The Midnight through the lens of unnatural eco-poetics reveals that the poet’s interest in history and culture inform her experiences of environments and shape her textual space.<sup>xxv</sup> It is by engaging with this history and foregrounding its presence that Howe’s integration of found text alongside personal response and poetic inquiry creates a textual space derived from lived experience. In recognizing how reading The Midnight through the lens of unnatural eco-poetics enhances our understanding of the book, we begin to see the diverse applicability of this new branch of eco-poetic theory. Through this lens, Howe—a foundational contemporary poet who, like Hejinian, is often associated with language poetry, but one who has remained outside the scope of eco-poetics and of ecocriticism generally—is finally able to be recognized for her interest in how environments are expressed.

Chapter four, “The Eco-poetics of Found Text and Textual Space in Kenneth Goldsmith’s Seven American Deaths and Disasters,” considers Goldsmith’s conceptual poetry<sup>xxvi</sup> through the lens of unnatural eco-poetics by considering its primary focus on unnatural experiences, objects, or events, and its simultaneous examination of how specific real-world moments are experienced both personally and culturally through broadcasts that shape public sentiment and the broadcasters who deliver the message. In Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age (2011), Kenneth Goldsmith



argues that “[b]y taking our city’s physical geography and overlaying it with psychogeography—a technique of mapping the psychic and emotional flows of a city instead of its rational street grids—we become more sensitive to our surroundings . . . Geography, then—that most concrete of propositions to which we are bound—is reconfigurable and customizable through the imagination” (37). Here, Goldsmith argues that viewing the world not only through a lens of geography, but one in which geography and individual experience meet makes one’s encounters with that environment more meaningful. In Seven American Deaths and Disasters Goldsmith puts this philosophy into practice. Transcribing radio and television reports of a number of recent national deaths and disasters, Goldsmith creates a poetic expression of these lived experiences by overlaying them with the various cultural depictions that arose with the events themselves. In found poems like Goldsmith’s language is extracted directly from the lived experience—cultural, digital, natural, and political. As Goldsmith transcribes reports from particular experiences in the world, he expresses those moments without further translating them through the poet’s own language, but instead takes cultural artifacts and puts them on paper together in order to illustrate the complex narratives that constructed that moment. In this way, the found poetry that is represented by Goldsmith’s work, although entirely unnatural, can still be read ecopoetically. I include this chapter near the end of my dissertation because this book displays the ways in which the kind of recycling of language apparent in early iterations of unnatural ecopoetics, such as Ammons’s Garbage, is re-conceptualized and extended in new forms and in response to the social, environmental, and technological realities at hand. By reconstituting the very cultural artifacts that shape everyday human experiences in the world—news reports,

snippets of information, photographs, and un-contextualized information that we are constantly exposed to through our highly digitized lives—Goldsmith creates textual environments that are literally composed of experiences.

As this dissertation identifies the relevance of unnatural eco-poetics in a variety of unlikely poetic spaces, its conclusion points to further applications and developments for eco-poetic theory. Since the prefix eco is typically used in modern culture as a reference to the environmental movement, the deployment of the term eco-poetics in relation to poems that are seemingly absent of nature is somewhat unusual. However, as we see earlier in this dissertation, the shift that I identify within eco-poetic theory is closely aligned with changes that have already taken place in ecocriticism more generally. As new materialist ideas ask us to question where we draw the line between nature and culture, the concept of a purely natural environment is becoming increasingly fictional. Rather, environments are revealed as all around us—ranging from our own bodies to the digital and textual places that we construct. As eco-poetics begins to engage with these new ideas and expands its boundaries to include less traditional understandings of environment, it becomes more widely applicable. This dissertation's conclusion, "The Future of Eco-poetics in New Poetics and New Spaces," will demonstrate that with the shift toward unnatural eco-poetics, biological art like Christian Bök's poem "The Xenotext," visual art including the mixed media work of Patrick Hammerlein and Robert Grenier's drawn poems become reasonable texts to read eco-poetically, thus opening the field to new applications and thus new understandings of how individuals conceive of and interact with their environments. These radically different texts are useful here because while different, they all imagine text as malleable to the moment, evolving alongside

experience. Once ecopoetics has the flexibility to recognize diverse expressions of naturecultures, it becomes capable of considering how a wide array of texts employ and engage with environment. In doing so, it highlights the various and often underrepresented ways in which individuals encounter and engage with the world, thus revealing that even unnatural spaces are shaped by material and nonmaterial forces in the environmental experience.

## CHAPTER ONE

### NATURALCULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS AND WASTED LANGUAGE IN A.R. AMMONS'S GARBAGE

In a 1967 talk entitled, "A Poem Is a Walk," A.R. Ammons states that he "prefer[s] confusion to oversimplified clarity, meaninglessness to neat, precise meaning, uselessness to overdirected usefulness. . . . Unlike the logical structure, the poem is an existence which can incorporate contradictions, inconsistencies, explanations and counter-explanations and still remain whole, and inexhaustible" (Set in Motion 15-16). The poet's commentary in the early stages of his career suggests an ongoing interest in irritating restrictively fixed and absolute categories in favor of something more flexible and authentic to real-world experience. By employing fluid forms and outlining seemingly authentic natural encounters, much of Ammons's early work lends itself to traditional ecopoetic analysis for its mimetic form and overt interest in the natural world. Garnering much ecocritical attention, poems like "Corsons Inlet," Sphere, and Garbage have become prominent in ecopoetic readings. However, traditional ecopoetic readings of these texts aligned so well with Ammons's work that the field has pigeonholed the poet as mimetic, ecocentric, and primarily interested in nature despite apparent movements to the contrary that emerge in his later work. Although these oft-recognized elements are

certainly present and arguably significant, this is only one of many approaches to Ammons's interest in the natural world and one that dramatically overshadows alternative readings of his relationship with the environment.

A.R. Ammons presents an opportunity to see the potential of unnatural ecopoetics and its differences from traditional conceptions of the term. Although the poet's work is often read as traditional ecopoetry, through this new lens the naturalcultural elements at play within it are revealed and how the textual space enlivens the material and nonmaterial aspects of an environmental experience become evident. This chapter proposes that unnatural ecopoetics reveals new facets of Ammons's late poetry by distinguishing readings of it from those of his early writing. From early poems such as "Corsons Inlet" (1965) and Tape for the Turn of the Year (1965) to Garbage (1993) and Glare (1997), Ammons's work is commonly read for its connections to ecopoetics. Scholars like John Elder, Gyorgyi Voros, Leonard Scigaj, Bonnie Costello, and John Felstiner have specifically considered the connections to landscape in Ammons's work. While Ammons's work can certainly be read through this lens of traditional ecopoetics, the seeming suitability of his work to traditional ecopoetics and other environmentally oriented readings causes some critics to lose sight of ways in which the poet gestures away from conventional ideas of nature and toward naturecultures.

Garbage, for instance, is a book-length poem that depicts a Florida trash heap off I-95.<sup>xxvii</sup> Written entirely in unrhymed couplets, the book presents the environment of waste with the same fluid form that permeates Ammons's earlier work, which often examines more traditionally natural spaces than the landfill by considering the shoreline in "Corsons Inlet" or the image of the planet in Sphere. In its shift away from traditional

conceptions of nature, Garbage exaggerates an interest in culture that is less prominent in his earlier books. The recognition of naturecultures in this late poem builds on efforts by Gyorgyi Voros to establish the significance of the trash heap as a site for nature and culture to fuse in “Wallace Stevens and A.R. Ammons as Men on the Dump” (2000). Voros begins to consider the general role of waste in Garbage, arguing that it serves both Stevens and Ammons as an equalizing space where high and low, nature and culture, human and non-human intermingle.<sup>xxviii</sup> She writes, “the dump disposes of hierarchy, among other things, even to the extent of including nature’s waste along with that of human, cultural waste” (Voros, “Men on the Dump” 163). In other words, because of the unique diversity within the contents of the heap, the poet’s selection of the dump conflates the human and the natural worlds. No longer separated by hierarchies, within the trash heap everything is intertwined.

Voros’s reading of the text marks an important step for Ammons scholarship as the poet’s work begins to gain recognition not only for its mimetic qualities but also for its interest in naturalcultural fusions. However, even this compelling approach to Garbage minimizes the importance of language and its limitations in such an endeavor. While naturecultures are present in Garbage, the book is not primarily interested in the intersections of nature and culture in the garbage heap but more concerned with how language can express such a fusion. By reading Ammons’s work through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics—a critical mode of reading that considers how the material and nonmaterial elements of environmentality, including physical elements as well as the subjective and cultural peripheral data that bombards the perceiver, is represented in text—we can look at a poet typically read through the lens of traditional ecopoetics for

his mimetic expression of environments through language and form, and finally recognize that Ammons's poetry is not simply mimetic of nature but also recognizes the complex interrelations between nature, culture, and language. Initially, the garbage heap appears to be the perfect site for naturecultures because it perceived as a place where the bi-products of culture are disposed and decomposed by and into the natural world. Yet, the naturalcultural aspects of the trash heap do not emerge solely from the placement of both natural and cultural elements together, but the unnatural thing that they become together—their naturalcultural form results from the changes that occur to natural and cultural contents within the trash heap, leaving them altered by one another but not fully decomposed. While the trash heap begins with both nature and culture, as a result of their processing through the dump, they are neither natural nor cultural but something entirely new and ultimately unnatural. An unnatural eco poetic reading of Ammons's poetry acknowledges the unnatural results of naturalcultural fusions within the garbage heap and reveals that as his poetry moves toward naturecultures later in his career, it explores different issues than early work like "Corson's Inlet."

Reading Garbage through the lens of unnatural eco poetics bridges the gap between readings of Ammons's poetry as eco poetry and mainstream literary scholarship on the poet. Aside from eco poetic approaches to his poetry, some of the most prominent literary scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have taken a particular interest in Ammons, presenting arguments that run parallel to the claims I propose in this chapter. In fact, scholars such as Bonnie Costello, Harold Bloom, Marjorie Perloff, and Daniel Tobin identify Ammons as everything from a landscape poet to a poet of the Romantic Sublime. Bloom, one of the best known and most admiring friends and critics of

Ammons, attempts to distance the poet from nature and instead reads his poetry in the tradition of the Romantic Sublime. While many critics, namely Geoffrey Hartman who is well-known for his readings of Ammons's work as overtaken by the voice of nature, argue that nature is the poet's central image, in "A.R. Ammons: The Breaking of the Vessels," Bloom contends that such readings oversimplify how images of nature function in the texts. He writes,

I myself would say that both Hartman and Ammons are strong misreaders of Ammons, for at least from Saliences on he does not write nature-poetry, and indeed I would go back to origins and say truly that he never did write nature-poetry. What Ammons calls 'nature,' whether he celebrates it or says goodbye to it, is no more natural than Emerson's Nature was, or Whitman's either. . . . His image, as he admits, is of desire or the will-to-power, what he calls longing, and such an image can never be fulfilled by or in nature. (emphasis in original; Bloom 193-4)

Arguing that Ammons does not write nature poetry but instead engages in a "longing" for transcendence, Bloom contends that nature in Ammons's work is always a point of struggle as it remains beyond his reach.<sup>xxix</sup> By identifying nature as a site of longing rather than mimesis, Bloom re-inserts the gap between the physical world and human perceptions of it. For Ammons, as Bloom illustrates, nature is something with which the poet wrestles but cannot overtake.

Bloom's reading problematizes mainstream critiques of Ammons's work, taking issue with nature being exalted as the central trope in the book. Most Ammons scholarship, though, takes the opposite stance. For instance, in "A.R. Ammons and the Poetics of Chaos," Daniel Tobin argues "in a manner consistent with Coleridge's insight on the nature of imagination, though far more radical in his organicism, Ammons would recapture in his poetry the living dynamic of nature" (119). For Tobin, as for many other



Ammons scholars, the poet's work emerges organically from the natural world. However, in "The Soil and Man's Intelligence," Costello similarly challenges the central role attributed to nature when she contends that Ammons should be read for the parallels he draws between language and landscape rather than his mimesis. She writes, in Ammons's work "language is not so much part of nature (as in [Gary] Snyder) as nature, or things observed in nature, are like language . . . We are reminded repeatedly that this poet is looking at nature not for itself but for what it can offer the imagination" (Costello 424). Although like Bloom's analysis this reading of Ammons's work is not identified by the critic as an ecopoetic lens, Costello's reading supports a movement toward what I identify as an unnatural ecopoetic reading, in which self-reflexive language and formal experimentation foregrounds a textual space where the material and nonmaterial elements of environmentality are exposed. The previous analyses of Ammons's poetry reveal that while nature appears to be present in his work, too easily granting it a central role in the book can cause critics to overlook other important elements. An unnatural ecopoetic reading will align and even expand on these critiques as they demand that Ammons be read for the struggle he has with naturecultures throughout his poetry.

Despite the variety of perspectives one might take on the environment in his work, Ammons's early poetry lends itself to traditional ecopoetic readings, prompting critics to interrogate the early stages of his engagement with nature through this lens. To understand how Ammons is traditionally read and what might be gained by considering alternative unnatural ecopoetic approaches to his work, I will briefly demonstrate a more traditional ecopoetic approach to his early poetry and then consider how those same approaches are often used to analyze his late work, despite the many differences between

early and late Ammons. John Elder's Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature (1985), one of the earliest and most prominent examples of ecopoetic theory in action, illustrates how well Ammons's writing lends itself to traditional conceptions of ecopoetics. Elder exemplifies the connections succinctly in his brief analysis of Sphere, a book-length poem that takes the "sphere" of earth as its subject. He writes that "[t]he one long sentence that is Sphere curves out to encompass the birch and shale of landscape closely observed, curves back to join the circle of imagination's 'new coherences'; Ammons's interwoven lines express his 'integral' vision of mind and earth" (Elder 136). In his brief analysis of the poem, Elder points to the central characteristics of traditional ecopoetic critique. Sphere is read through this lens for its formal attempt to mimic the natural elements of its subject. The "one long sentence" that Elder identifies allows the poet to engage with the vast complexity and interconnections across the globe, a trait that runs through much of his writing and one that inspires ecopoetic attention.

Ammons's 1965 poem, "Corsons Inlet," demonstrates similar traits to those identified by Elder in his analysis of Sphere; specifically, the poem abandons human order and embraces how the disorder of nature shapes the poetic form. The poet conflates the poetic world with the natural realm as the text appears to be shaped not only by human forces but also by organic ones. Although the words remain a product of the poet's human language and logic, the speaker allows them to expand by accepting and adapting them to the flux of nature. Thus, traditional ecopoetic readings by Elder, Scigaj, and Schneider among others, posit that in the poem language begins to escape limiting forms that impose meanings and instead becomes closer to expressing an authentic experience in nature. Reading the poem as an attempt to escape limiting fixed forms

seems appropriate from the opening lines of “Corsons Inlet.” As the speaker begins to embark on a “walk,” he moves “to the sea, / then [turns] right along / the surf” (Ammons, CP 148). The speaker begins by abiding by human forms and ideas of order when he embraces “perpendicular” angles and fixed directions in turning “right” at the sea. The “right” turn, a direction not dictated by natural order but by imposed cultural forces is directly contrasted by the speaker’s subsequent walk. Once he reaches the sea, a site of natural rather than social order, the speaker begins his journey away from human order and the rigid structures that it imposes upon nature:

The walk liberating, I was released from forms,  
 from the perpendiculars,  
                   straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds  
 of thought  
 into the hues, shadings, rises flowing bends and blends  
                   of sight (Ammons, CP 148)

Traditional ecopoetic readings might contend that the walk is, in true Thoreauvian fashion, a “liberating” force because it releases the speaker from anthropocentric ideas of order (“straight lines, blocks, boxes, [and] binds of thought”) that restrict his “thought.” Later in the poem, the speaker points out that “in nature there are few sharp lines” (Ammons, CP 148). Thus, these forms from which he is liberated are inorganic, occurring in human consciousness as a source of order and containment. These are the “perpendicular” forms that prompt him to turn “right” rather than following the natural curve of the shoreline. In this sense, these forms impose human order onto nature and make it impossible to experience it authentically or in a pure, unadulterated state. Thus, as the speaker moves through the environment and the walk begins to alter his perceptions of nature, these rigid forms are replaced by more fluid and vague concepts

(“hues, shadings, rises flowing bends and blends / of sight”). Unlike the rigid structures of containment that are previously deserted, the speaker moves “into” the flexible and temporal forms that rise, flow, and bend in order to adapt to nature, rather than forcing nature to adapt to a fixed form.

Traditional ecopoetic readings point to the poem’s movement away from order and toward the assumed chaos of nature as a sign of the poet’s desire to present a fresh and authentic moment. Elder argues that in “Corsons Inlet,” “the emphasis is on the way in which nature and the poet alike break open old orders continually, to liberate the materials from which new orders may be ‘grasped.’ . . . Accordingly, the world of Ammons’s poetry is always presented as a freshly emerging event” (144). His desire to create an untainted moment on the page that can convey the novelty of real-world experience is precisely what aligns Ammons’s work with much traditional ecopoetic theory. As he wanders toward chaos and away from order both through his poetic content and form, the poet creates texts that embrace ecocentrism as they acknowledge the value not only in cycles of human order but natural cycles as well. In a poetics liberated from order, Ammons creates a fresh language. Although more explicitly than Elder, in Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets (1999), Scigaj similarly identifies Ammons’s attention to natural order as an attempt to express the pre-linguistic moment; he observes that such moves are staples of traditional ecopoetics: “[w]ithin ecopoetry and environmental poetry, language is often foregrounded only to reveal its limitations, and this is accomplished in such a way that the reader’s gaze is thrust beyond language back into the less limited world that language refers to, the inhabited place where human must live in harmony with ecological cycles” (Scigaj 38). In acknowledging the ways that

original experiences are altered as they are translated through poetry and seeking to move the “reader’s gaze” to the “less limited” world of natural order, Scigaj and Elder argue that Ammons’s ecopoetics in “Corsons Inlet” is an ecocentric one as it acknowledges the natural world as equal to that of humans.

The ecocentric perspective becomes active in the poem when the speaker explains that “eddies of meaning” allow words to be used in a new way that can infuse nature into the poetic world (“in my sayings”) (Ammons, CP 148). As the speaker permits himself to move against the current of traditional language and toward the kinds of “swerves” found on the shoreline, words are released from their conventional usages (Ammons, CP 148). Thus, nature begins to move “like a stream through the geography of [the poet’s] work” because the words have been removed from customary usage and become “eddies” of language as they are used in a new way (Ammons, CP 148). In A.R. Ammons and the Poetics of Widening Scope, Steven Schneider observes that “[t]he varying lengths of the lines jut and curve down the page, evoking both the movement of the poet’s walk along the inlet’s shore and the uneven margins of the inlet itself. In reading them, the eyes must oscillate, swinging back and forth. In addition to engaging the reader in a beneficial visual exercise, the content of the poem points out toward nature” (82). The poetic form responds to the speaker’s change in perception; as his walk removes him from anthropocentric ideas of order and allows him to embrace the “eddies of meaning,” the speaker and the poetic form both gain liberation (Ammons, CP 148). As Schneider points out, the lines stagger across the page, not limited by formal poetic elements of meter or rhyme, instead fluctuating with the natural forces that they imitate. Both language and form are tied to the speaker’s natural encounter.

The role of language in translating natural forms to the page is of primary interest to traditional ecopoetic scholars, not only in “Corsons” but throughout Ammons’s poetics. As the speaker of “Corsons” realizes that the shoreline does not demand logic and order but instead concedes to the whims of sand, wind, and water, he begins to search for a language with the same flexibility and authenticity to the moment. As Elder observes, this is embodied in the poem through the poet’s use of “single unbroken sentences, with colons serving to mark the breaths and to link the poetic elements of variable length” (146). The colons allow the words on the page to embody a flowing river; the sentences do not reach a syntactic end, but simply drift into the next point. As Elder observes, the flowing form of the lines and the syntactic continuity produced by the colons allows the poet to literally erect “no boundaries” and simultaneously to mimic on the page the flows of the shore (Ammons, CP 149). As his words begin to move as a force in nature, “inside” and “outside,” nature and language, become conflated in the poem.

Scholars like Elder, Schneider, and Scigaj demonstrate that Ammons’s work aligns with traditional theories of ecopoetics, which are primarily interested in poetic mimicry of natural environments. Ammons’s interest in language and form coupled with his prolonged interest in nature lends itself to ecopoetic analysis. Yet, critics like Gyorgyi Voros argue that Ammons’s “mirroring” of the natural world fails. In “Earth’s Echo: Answering Nature in Ammons’s Poetry,” Voros observes: “[v]ision in Ammons . . . expressed in tropes of looking, seeing, and mirroring, is most often the mechanism for failed negotiations of the incongruence between human and nonhuman worlds” (93). Voros recognizes that despite all of his efforts throughout his poetics, Ammons’s work

never achieves congruency with nature but always remains one step removed. The doubt that surrounds Ammons's eco-poetics becomes more identifiable in relation to his later poetry, where the exalted power of nature becomes troubled. Yet, most eco-poetic scholars do not readily embrace the depth of this failure or consider how it fundamentally alters the foundation of the poet's work. As a result, Ammons's late poems are read in much the same way as his early work, for their ecocentric, mimetic, and natural elements.

### **A Traditional Eco-poetic Reading of Garbage**

I would like to build on my analysis of how "Corsons" is typically read eco-poetically by considering how Garbage is traditionally analyzed through this lens and engaging in such a reading of the text alongside scholars who have made similar claims. In these traditional analyses, it will be evident that approaches to Ammons's work have not changed much despite the nearly thirty-year gap between these two famous poems. In response to this, after establishing the typical approach to the book I will embark on a new reading of the same text, demonstrating how unnatural eco-poetics reveals aspects of the text that have previously been dismissed or overlooked due to the limited scope of traditional eco-poetics. Juxtaposing these two readings of Ammons's book will reveal not only the benefits of considering the text through this new lens but also demonstrate the necessity of unnatural eco-poetics in understanding and recognizing the emergence of new concerns in contemporary poetry.

Garbage was published nearly thirty years after "Corsons Inlet" yet the two poems are typically viewed as quite similar. Scholars like Helen Vendler, Gyorgyi Voros, Leonard Scigaj, Willard Spiegelman, and Frederick Buell identify Garbage as

reconstituting many of the same themes that are identified in his early work. Vendler, Spiegelman, and Scigaj, for instance, contend that Garbage exemplifies an interconnectedness with the earth by formally mimicing the garbage heap. In “The Snow Poems and Garbage: Episodes in an Evolving Poetics,” Vendler observes, “[s]ince the whole of Garbage is a hymn to the necessary principle of extinction (as life is ‘consumed with that which it was nourished by,’ the enlivening and extinguishing flame of the *calor vitae*), it is of the essence that the poem be engaged in constant change of both genre and diction” (emphasis in original; 46). She argues that the book’s shifts in “genre and diction,” apparent in the splicing that occurs in the poem alongside the speaker’s constantly changing tone, are expressive of the poem’s external environment as it mimics the variety of objects disposed of in the heap. Scigaj similarly argues, although more explicitly, that nature is the model for the book (110) and in “Building Up and Breaking Down: The Poetics of Composting,” Spiegelman observes that “as a romantic poem organized, at least in part, along the lines of Coleridgean organicism it tries to imitate as well as describe the reality of which it constitutes a part. These arguments are not unfounded and are certainly worth consideration, yet they too easily attribute Ammons’s form and diction to mimesis without considering how the poem’s rigid couplet structure or imposed section breaks might problematize a mimetic structure. Similar to alternate interpretations of the text forwarded by scholars such as Buell and Voros, these analyses of Garbage are eerily similar to readings of Ammons’s earlier work, namely the most popular for eco-poetic attention, “Corsons Inlet.”

Also in the vein of “Corsons” criticism, Buell, Voros, and Scigaj argue that the book demonstrates ecocentrism or biocentrism in its distribution of equality among all



natural things—human and non-human alike. In “Ammons’s Peripheral Vision: Tape for the Turn of the Year and Garbage,” Buell contends that “Garbage is not just a high, late point in a major American poet’s career, but also a significant opening for the future. Garbage is this for a number of different reasons: because it takes the nature tradition past the pastoral and into a thoroughly penetrated, postmodern world; because it faces the limits that even ‘postmodern’ environmentalism places upon conceptions of nature and faces up to post-humanism as possibly the completest ecocentrism” (236-7). Buell’s analysis posits that in embracing the decay of the trash heap, the book deals with the inevitable realities of a post-human world and embraces ecocentrism. In her analysis of Ammons and Wallace Stevens’s relationship with trash, Voros similarly observes that Garbage engages with all creatures equally and foregrounds that equality even from its dedication to those “low on the food chain” (“Men on the Dump” 167). Like many of Ammons’s previous texts, then, Garbage is recognized for its ability to create a level field for all creatures, both through form and content, thus engaging in what Scigaj identifies as a biocentric poetics (85). The prevalence of such themes in the book is undeniable, but the dominant readings of the text are remarkably similar to readings of the poet’s work from nearly thirty years earlier and, as in ecopoetic readings of the book’s form, seem to overlook the dominance of an anthropocentric meta-poetic commentary and authorial observation that permeates and arguably even dominates the book.

Like another of Ammons’s later long poems, Glare, Garbage is written almost exclusively in couplets and in the poet’s signature style flows smoothly through fluid colons, entirely without end stops. Although the form of these later books is radically different from much of the poet’s earlier writing, including the previous example of

“Corsons Inlet,” the critical attention that it garners is in many ways similar to that of Ammons’s earlier work. Even critics like Helen Vendler, who acknowledge that Ammons’s poetics has evolved over the course of his career, accept that many of the same central tenets span his oeuvre (49).

Traditionally, Ammons’s work is recognized for its acknowledgment of complexity in the natural world and an engagement with an ecocentric perspective that accommodates that complexity. Ammons seems to support readings that privilege complexity when he considers the inherent problems with this desire to understand something completely without accounting for what cannot be known. He observes that “[d]efinition, rationality, and structure are ways of seeing, but they become prisons when they blank out other ways of seeing. If we remain openminded we will soon find for any easy clarity an equal and opposite, so that the sum of our clarities should return us where we belong, to confusion and, hopefully, to more complicated and better assessments” (Ammons, *Set in Motion* 15). Put another way, in order to recognize the complexity of nature, one must accept a lack of closure and embrace confusion rather than attempting to impose “[d]efinition, rationality, and structure” upon it. *Garbage* appears to embrace this methodology. Unable to fully comprehend nature, the speaker turns away from anthropocentric modes of perception and articulates an ecocentric approach that emerges from pure feeling or sensation rather than logical thinking:

the mind begins  
to make an effort, to shed from itself all  
  
awareness except that of going with the feeling,  
to relax and hold the feeling (Ammons, *G* 43)

This passage reveals a way of seeing that relies on the immediacy of sensation rather than

filtration through the distorting lens of human thought, reason, or logic. The human “mind,” here, “sheds” thought, which is imbued with the influence of logic and reason, and instead turns toward the “feeling” or sensation of an experience as a more authentic way of experiencing the world. Not unlike Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man,”<sup>xxx</sup> in which the speaker proclaims, “One must have a mind of winter . . . not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind” Ammons’s speaker recognizes that the observer must have a mind devoid of human influences in order to see the environment accurately (Stevens 8). Just as for Stevens, the observer must “have a mind of winter,” for Ammons, the speaker must turn away from thought and reason, allowing the mind to “shed from itself all / awareness” by turning to pure feeling. Embodying a fully ecocentric perspective, then, the speaker recognizes that only by removing the distortion inherent in human thought and embracing confusion can the observer begin to see the world accurately.

For Ammons, this issue of confusion or multiplicity rather than fixity is specifically connected to language when the speaker reveals that the use of words in these fixed contexts has rendered them useless—transformed them into linguistic waste:

there is a mound,  
 too, in the poet’s mind dead language is hauled  
 off to and burned down on, the energy held and  
 shaped into new turns and clusters (Ammons, G 20)

No longer only garbage as physical waste but as a collection of disposed words, the poem here appears to shift to the issues that connect not only waste and rejuvenation (“shaped into new turns”), but also words and their redemption. This is an issue that persists

throughout the book as the speaker continuously reiterates that “in your / end is my beginning” and that “the matter goes on, / turning into this and that, never the same thing / twice” (Ammons, G 36, 37). As words, like garbage, are placed in the dump they become something new, creating a new beginning as they take on a new meaning. In a 1994 interview with the Paris Review, Ammons states that “[t]he garbage heap of used-up language is thrown at the feet of poets, and it is their job to make or revamp a language that will fly again” (Set in Motion 102). Harkening back to William Carlos Williams, this poetics demands that we must “begin to begin again,”<sup>xxxix</sup> or start fresh from a place of deterioration. Scigaj recognizes the shift toward renewal as eco poetic when he claims that language constantly demands rejuvenation. He observes that the poet “can only attempt to find fresh language as far removed from clichés as possible to evoke what one cannot completely convey in language, but can experience fully in the lived moment” (Scigaj 68). Only when the words have reached their end, when they are in the garbage dump of language, do they escape clichés and become eligible for rejuvenation. Recognizing this passage as a bid for recycling language, a traditional eco poetic reading might contend that once words are at their end, they must be reformulated in order to once again become useful signifiers of the world.

In Garbage, the issue of rejuvenation is both literally and figuratively present in the trash heap. Early in the poem, the speaker proclaims that the dump “is the gateway to beginning . . . the portal / of renewing change” (Ammons, G 28). Indeed, the pile of garbage is always decomposing, but the speaker implies that this deterioration is the path to new beginnings. When objects are reduced to this space of uselessness and decay, they demand renewal. Spiegelman considers Ammons’s selection of garbage as a theme

and its apparent correlation to language. He observes that “like garbage, language never really dies: in a harmonious universe of Lucretian or Pythagorean economy, life comes from death, seeds from shit. Garbage was not garbage to start with, nor was current cliché originally dead language” (61). As Spiegelman considers the correlation of cliché or “dead language” in relation to garbage, he inspires us to return our attention, momentarily, to the poet’s dedication. Offered first to the insects that help to decompose trash, the dedication is secondly directed at “wordsmiths—the transfigurers, restorers.” Wordsmiths, who like blacksmiths transform raw material into workable objects, perform the acts of transfiguration and restoration by making something that was previously useless become functional. These are, in keeping with Spiegelman’s point, then, the individuals who restore “dead language.” As such, it is within the garbage dump, the space of this reformulation, that “there / could be a straightaway from the toxic past into / the fusion-lit reaches of a coming time!” (Ammons, G 28-9). In a rare instance of punctuation, the speaker acknowledges the power of trash. In this “toxic past,” where the discarded waste of humans is rendered useless, a promising future emerges.

Like “Corsons,” scholars observe that Garbage takes on a form that mimics its environment, arguing that in the book, “[n]ature, not language, is the model for the poem's structure” (Scigaj 110). In this sense, Scigaj argues that the physical environment is not only the impetus for the poem but that the trash heap also shapes its form. Similarly, Vendler specifically attributes the book’s form to the physical environment when she identifies its mimetic quality: “The point of all Ammons’s unsettling changes (thematic, generic, lexical) is to mimic a universe constituted of continual creations and destructions, to ratify a metaphysics acceding to the necessity of change, and to announce

an ethics of protest, urgent (if helplessly so) against the human waste entailed by the universal principles of destruction” (47). For Vendler, the poem attempts to “mimic” the physical space of the trash heap in an effort to encourage real-world action from the reader to acknowledge and change the destructive habits of waste that permeate human culture.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The speaker introduces the dump’s inspiration for the poem as well as the physical presence of garbage within the poetic landscape when he states: “down by I-95 in / Florida where flatland’s ocean- and gulf-flat, / mounds of disposal rise” (Ammons, G 18). No longer only an idea in the poetic world but also an object that exists in the physical realm beyond the poem, the garbage dump becomes the site of interconnection between reality and imagination, poetic landscape and physical terrain, materiality and text.

Read through the lens of traditional ecopoetics, the ties between the physical and the textual appear to be obvious in the poem’s formal structure, especially its unique use of colons in lieu of end stops. The colon allows the poem to easily flow from one point to the next without drawing distinct boundaries around individual ideas and, similar to Elder’s reading of “Corsons Inlet,” the colons serve to “link the poetic elements.” Scigaj similarly observes that the colon is “Ammons’s trademark that often registers a homological equivalency for the statements on either side” (85). The equivalency is particularly pronounced in Garbage because it reflects the central image of the book—the content of the trash heap. Voros argues that the image of the dump presents the reader with a sense of unity and intermingling between all things, ultimately serving as an equalizer (“Men on the Dump” 163). Everything is thrust together in the dump, including all forms of detritus, and the colon provides a tool to express such fusion. The colons are

indicative of the interconnections between all things, including language, nature, and culture. As such, the poem's structure becomes an expression of the landscape and seeks to manifest that space in language.

Such readings are further strengthened when the connections between the physical environment and the textual space are reiterated later in the book. In section thirteen, the speaker states:

the  
 streams' yielding bending fathers my winding:  
 and the semicircles' gusts before storms make  
  
 grassclumps draw in the sand—these are the  
 going closures that organize mind, allowing  
  
 and limiting, my mind's ways: the rabbit's  
 leaps and halts, listenings, are prosody of  
  
 a poem floating through the mind's brush: I  
 mix my motions in with the mix of motions, all  
  
 motions cousins, conveyors, purveyors, surveyors,  
 rising from the land (Ammons, G 83-4)

The speaker proclaims that it is “the streams’” movement that “fathers” his own poetic movement (“father’s my winding”) and ultimately, these are the “going closures” or flexible endings, as opposed to the formal and finite closure of the end stop, that are “allowing and limiting” the speaker. In this sense, the speaker here points out that he is not governed by the formal elements of writing, but by the natural flux of the environment. Critics argue that the formal connection to the physical world in the text occurs not only through the poet’s use of his signature colon, but also through the jumbled confusion of the book as a whole. Vendler, for instance, writes, “[s]ince the

whole of Garbage is a hymn to the necessary principle of extinction . . . it is of the essence that the poem be engaged in constant change of both genre and diction. . . . we find ourselves in the midden-heap of language and literature, comparable to the Florida pit with its life-detritus” (emphasis in original; Vendler 46). In other words, she claims that the confusion and intentional ambiguity that permeate the book along with its frequent infusion of external literary references, personal reflection, and meta-poetic commentary reflects on the page the form of the “Florida pit” or dump site. It is the activity of the land that becomes “prosody of / a poem floating through the mind’s brush” because the speaker allows those forces to move through him, not demanding that they conform to his categories and classifications, but accepting the land’s movement as it is and placing that movement as unaltered as possible in the poetic landscape. Ultimately, the speaker returns to the notion of interconnection—stating that “all motions,” human and non-human, are products of “the land” and thus intrinsically linked.

Traditional eco-poetic readings posit that Garbage attempts to present a natural poem that is imbued with the physicality of the world through its ecocentrism, meta-poetic commentary on recycled language, and mimetic form. Certainly, many critics who place nature as the central component of Ammons’s poetics and who align, either intentionally or otherwise, with traditional eco-poetic interpretations posit that Garbage embodies these three traits. However, other scholars who take similarly eco-poetic approaches in their analyses come to different conclusions. Costello contends that the poet is “offering the soil as the object and model of man’s intelligence. Ammons often hovers around an immanentist mode which abandons all rhetoricity in the presence of the particular, but his imagination never truly entertains the primitive. While he enjoys those



moments when poetic authority is disarmed by natural presence, the submissive or natural voice is often a foil for a highly rhetorical vision” (420). Costello argues that Ammons is using the natural elements of the text to fuel his “rhetorical vision” and that the rhetorical takes precedence. In this sense, the soil is not a model but a tool that the poet uses strategically and not blindly. As such, the argument so prominent in traditional ecopoetic readings that the poem embodies the natural world, speaking for it through form and meta-poetic commentary, is troubled by critics like Costello. Andrew Zawacki similarly challenges the role of nature in Ammons’s work in “Ego and Eco: Saying “I” in Expressions of Sea Level.” Here, Zawacki reminds readers of the simple fact that “the poem and the book have inevitably been said by the human. That is, the poet can’t get out of the way: any attempts to write by sea level are destined to be haunted by the insistence of what is being said about sea level...Eco is constantly remanded to the ego” (51). Recognizing that even though Ammons’s poetics is tied to the natural world, he cannot replace his own self or “ego” with the “eco.” The human is always the intermediary between the two worlds.

For some ecopoetic readings, the reality that the influence of human reason and logic always stands between the poet and nature is difficult to overcome. Since much traditional ecopoetic critique is built on the premise that the poem can express a natural space on the page,<sup>xxxiii</sup> the deflation of such a possibility sends ecopoetics into crisis. However, by embracing the reality that word cannot equal world rather than trying to overcome it we can begin to see a sort of harmony developing between the human and the natural. No longer attempting to push each other aside or as Costello puts it, “coexist[ing] rather than compet[ing] for authority,” the human and the natural begin to

fuse in Garbage (422). As a late poem in Ammons's career, the book, unlike his earlier poetry, engages directly with the detritus, decay, and filth that represent the reality of a late 20<sup>th</sup> century relationship between nature and human culture.

### **An Unnatural Eco poetic Reading of Garbage**

Traditional eco poetic approaches to Ammons's work focus on its mimetic formal structures, which are often viewed as the poet's attempt to express an ecocentric perspective that gives voice to nature. In these readings, nature remains at the fore and garners the majority of critical attention. However, the lens of unnatural eco poetics presents new possibilities for reading Ammons's work by identifying the dominant presence of naturecultures in the book and, more importantly, locating the textual space where those naturalcultural elements are exposed and made active. The case for a traditional eco poetic reading of Garbage is strong and certainly has its merits. Yet, I cannot help but wonder how much of these readings is predicated on understandings of Ammons's earlier poems and whether traditional eco poetic readings of the book are infused with interpretations of his earlier work. Such information may be useful in understanding the text but it is important to remember that Garbage is in many ways quite different from the poet's previous writing and might be expressing different sentiments than his earlier work. With that in mind, I propose a new approach to Garbage through the lens of unnatural eco poetics in which the book's form, naturalcultural elements, meta poetic commentary, and ecocentrism, which make it so ripe for traditional eco poetic readings, are viewed from a new perspective. Through the lens of unnatural eco poetics, Garbage attains a new relevance in eco poetic studies.

The trash heap is considered by many critics of this book to be a sort of peripherally natural space, where nature recycles the waste of human civilization back to the earth. Scholars often view Ammons's trash heap as cleansing, a reading that mirrors broader attitudes toward waste, such as Morrison's, which contend that waste and dirt have an ability to cleanse (473). Voros similarly argues that "rubbish is material approaching a condition analogous to that of wilderness in nature" and that the theme of Garbage is the "possibility for resacrilizing trash as the necessary prelude to rebirth and regeneration" ("Men on the Dump" 173-4). Likening garbage to the natural environment and promoting its regenerative role, Voros and others attribute the theme of the book to be garbage and its promising power to regenerate the world. The book's speaker, though, does not only present garbage itself as regenerative for the world but instead proposes that the trash heap is a space of new creations, where naturalcultural fusions do not bring complete decay or complete creation, but something in between—something new. As the Department of Health and Environmental Control confirms, trash does not completely break down nor decompose when placed in a landfill ("Landfills" 2). However, it does begin the process, changing from its original state but not promising rebirth for hundreds or even thousands of years. Instead of a literal recycling or transformation, the book's setting on the trash heap provides a metaphorical space where material and nonmaterial elements that shape experiences in the world become evident and active. In the trash heap, human and nonhuman material elements begin to act as they alter and shape language in new ways.. Trash is not a symbol of promise and rejuvenation for the earth nor one of decay and destruction that necessarily constitutes the kind of call to political action that traditional ecopoetic readings posit. Ammons's garbage is a site of

naturalcultural fusions, but those elements of the text are only made apparent and active through the poem's textual space.

An unnatural ecopoetic reading of Garbage is focused on the textual space that the poet creates through self-reflexive language and form. In the textual space of the poem it becomes clear that Ammons's book is not primarily about garbage itself; the book is ultimately about the metaphorical power of waste. By identifying garbage as a site of naturalcultural fusion, the book reveals the material and nonmaterial elements that compose the poet's environmental experience. When human and nonhuman materiality fuse in the heap, the metaphorical space of the poem demonstrates the agential power of those materials.

Ammons's work takes on new significance in this late poem as it begins to question the fundamental abilities of language to express the complexity and multiplicity in real-world experience with which he struggles to contend throughout his career. In the trash heap, the material waste of human culture is introduced into a traditionally natural space, fusing the two worlds and creating a new naturalcultural environment. For the speaker, this new space presents new challenges and possibilities for language, prompting him to explore the metaphorical power of garbage in relation to language. The speaker claims:

garbage has to be the poem of our time because  
garbage is spiritual, believable enough

to get our attention, getting in the way, piling  
up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and

creamy white: what else deflects us from the  
errors of our illusionary ways, not a temptation

to trashlessness, that is too far off, and,  
 anyway, unimaginable, unrealistic: I'm a

hole puncher or hole plugger: stick a finger  
 in the dame (dam, damn, dike), hold back the issue

of creativity's flood, the forthcoming, futuristic,  
 the origins feeding trash: down by I-95 in

Florida where flatland's ocean- and gulf-flat,  
 mounds of disposal rise (Ammons, G 18)

These lines, some of the most frequently quoted from the book because of their introduction of the poem's location on the landfill, serve as an ideal example of what Vendler calls the poet's "labyrinth" when she explains that his "interweaving of his generic set-pieces makes any canto seem a farrago of cross-cuts and jump-starts" (46). The formal confusion of the poem is considered by Vendler as mimetic of the trash heap, in which everything is interconnected as it dissolves and decays together. Indeed, if the reader views the poet's personal reflections, inquiries into language, and consideration of the physical trash heap as separate facets of the poem then Vendler's reading is apt and certainly helps explain the seemingly disjointed nature of his narrative. If, on the other hand, one acknowledges in the book the prominence of inquiries into language and thus recognizes language as the central character in the book, placing the trash heap along with the poet's reflections only in supporting roles, the passage attains a sense of unification and clarity that calls into question the supposedly mimetic form that many critics recognize in the text.

Costello observes that Ammons's poetry often "must begin in abstraction and return to landscape as the endless resource for the unfolding of that abstraction" (421). The concept of abstraction that Costello identifies might be applicable here when one

considers how and where the poem leaps to a new topic. The speaker begins by positing that his choice of the dump as a site for the poem is a practical one because “garbage is spiritual, believable enough / to get our attention.” In claiming that trash can get the reader’s attention through the physical changes that it brings to the world (“getting in the way, piling / up, stinking”), he reveals that garbage is a central image in the poem not because of its rejuvenating power but because it is a relatable spectacle (“believable enough”) that demands attention. As such, he goes on to exalt garbage as an escape for “our illusionary ways” and recognizes the ongoing inevitability of waste. Suddenly, though, in what Vendler might identify as a “cross-cut” or, as Costello writes, a return from landscape to abstraction, the poem seems to change its focus from garbage to language. Now considering the multiplicity of language, the speaker turns toward all meanings simultaneously when he writes, “dame (dam, damn, dike).” Appearing abruptly in the section and with no clearly identifiable meta-poetic commentary as in other sections of the book, this inquiry into language appears disconnected from the remainder of the section. Yet, when garbage is read as a metaphor for language, the section gains a sense of unification. As the speaker comments on his own role as a “hole plugger” of “creativity’s flood,” he reveals that this creativity is tied to “the origins feeding trash,” implying that creativity is the source of the trash heap. Only after connecting language and garbage does he reveal the physical location of the real-world trash heap off “I-95 in / Florida,” making the physical location secondary to linguistic play.

Unnatural ecopoetic critique reveals that the speaker considers the naturalcultural space of the landfill and the new substance being created within it to be reminiscent of the type of novelty necessary for language to remain relevant to the world. The

connections that the speaker draws between trash and creativity in this passage are bolstered by a passage earlier considered through the lens of traditional ecopoetics in which the speaker proclaims that “there is a mound, / too, in the poet’s mind dead language is hauled / off to and burned down on.” Traditional ecopoetic readings of these famous lines argue that the speaker’s claim that this “dead language” is “shaped into new turns and clusters” implies a rejuvenation of language within the trash heap, where the dead language re-emerges as fresh words with new promise. However, unnatural ecopoetics recognizes both the role of nature in the garbage dump and the alterations that occur as it fuses with cultural debris, ultimately revealing that language does not enter the trash heap and emerge entirely new, clean, and purified but as a version of itself, covered with the detritus of decay, filth, and dirt. Language does change in the trash heap but it re-emerges with a naturalcultural tint, still itself but changed by natural processes and imbued with the filth of its own decay along with the natural elements that facilitate it. As such, the speaker states that “life is like a poem: the moment it / begins, it begins to end” (Ammons, G 66). Once again mingling language with “life,” the speaker reveals that its relevance hinges upon novelty and newness.

While a traditional ecopoetic reading would highlight the re-emergence of language from the landfill as clean and promising, unnatural ecopoetics engages with its remnants of its former self and the filth of decay that stays with it. This occurs in two ways: first, by acknowledging how the remnants of words’ former meanings and usages—remnants like external connotations, former contexts, or similar words—place immediate limitations on them with which the poet must contend; and second, by considering how the filth of natural decay that coats them facilitates a more accurate

rendering of the complexity, imperfection, and confusion that surrounds real-world experience.

First, language is revealed as problematic in an unnatural ecopoetic reading, a reality that often prompts a failure of language or poetry and/or a foregrounding of language's limitations.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ultimately, language can never fully be nature, nor can nature be language—a reality that troubles the mimetic impulse in traditional ecopoetic theory. In Garbage, Ammons demonstrates that when language attempts to express raw reality, it is destined to fail. For many poets, including Williams, novelty is presented as a way around the barrier between nature and culture as he argues that making language new can make it more accurate to the world. However, the task of novelty is not an easy one for Ammons's speaker. As he struggles with the balance of nature and culture in the effort to write a poem instilled with such novelty he overtly contemplates naturalcultural fusions of the human and the persistent limitations of language.

but we are natural: nature, not

we, gave rise to us: we are not, though, though  
natural, divorced from higher, finer configurations:

tissues and holograms of energy circulate in  
us and seek and find representations of themselves

outside us, so that we can participate in  
celebrations high and know reaches of feeling

and sight and thought that penetrate (really  
penetrate) far, far beyond these our wet cells,

right on up past our stories, the planets, moons,  
and other bodies locally to the other end of

the pole where matter's forms diffuse and  
energy loses all means to express itself except



as spirit, there, oh, yes, in the abiding where  
mind but nothing else abides, the eternal,

until it turns into another pear or sunfish,  
that momentary glint in the fisheye having

been there so long, coming and going, it's  
eternity's glint: it all wraps back round,

into and out of form, palpable and impalpable,  
and in one phase, the one of grief and love,

we know the other, where everlastingness comes to  
sway, okay and smooth: the heaven we mostly

want, though, is this jet-hoveled hell back,  
heaven's daunting asshole: one must write and

rewrite till one writes it right (Ammons, G 21-2)

Only a few lines after commenting on “dead language” and its re-emergence from the dump, the speaker here considers the possibilities of naturalcultural unions and the challenges that remain for language despite the landfill's reconstitution of it. He establishes the inherent interrelation of nature and culture when he comments that “nature, not / we, gave rise to us,” implying the natural roots of humanity but quickly reminds the reader that humans are also infused with the “finer configurations” of culture. Both natural and cultural, humans maintain a capacity to reach “outside” themselves in order to comprehend the “feeling / and sight and thought that penetrate[s]” beyond the limitations of the human body (“far beyond these our wet cells”). Through this “higher” thinking that we might consider to be culture, the speaker explains that humans can move “past our stories” and even beyond knowledge (“the planets, moons, / and other bodies locally”) to places where “matter's forms diffuse and / energy loses all means to express

itself,” leaving only inexpressibility and thus incomprehensibility. In these formless places facilitated by human culture, matter can only express itself “as spirit,” a vague and intangible expression. In this spirit, the “mind” is identified as the only thing that “abides, the eternal,” a force that is both “momentary” and long-lasting (“having / been there so long”) because while the eternal cannot sustain a single form and is constantly changing (“turns into another pear or sunfish”), it has sustained power over the mind that allows it to remain ever-present. As such, the speaker goes on to reveal that the eternal shifts “into and out of form,” sometimes becoming “palpable” and sometimes “impalpable.” The human can only truly “know” the eternal or “everlastingness” as an emotion or feeling (“grief and love”) and not through the mind, which is grasping constantly at a fixed “hovel” or structure that is “daunting” the perceiver toward failure with the promise of stability.

Although this passage appears to be disconnected from the image of both garbage and language, it appears just after the book’s most pronounced connection between the two (“there is a mound, / too, in the poet’s mind dead language is hauled / off to”) and in the few subsequent lines between his discussion of “dead language” and naturecultures, the speaker asks “where / but in the grief of failure, loss, error do we / discern the savage afflictions that turn us around” (Ammons, G 21). The failure that precedes the poet’s discussion of naturecultures informs the conclusion of the passage that writing is endlessly destined to fail. In his acknowledgment that humans always seek ways of knowing and understanding that allow fixity rather than feeling, the speaker reveals that the demand for fixed knowledge brings with it a failure of language. He claims that “one must write and / rewrite till one writes it right,” realizing that to “write it right” is always

impossible since language is multiplicitous and always moving as “everlastingness comes to / sway, okay, and smooth.” The mind’s demand for such knowing and the quest for writing to express it lead to an inevitable failure of language that permeates the book. As such, immediately following this circular failure, the speaker embarks on a rant from the aging poet in which he questions his own relevance (Ammons, G 22).

The relevance of the poet’s work is largely hinged upon his view of language and the fluidity that he identifies in it throughout the book. In his 1993 essay, “On Garbage,” Ammons comments on how the call to “write it right” correlates with his poetics. He claims, “I have since the sixties . . . tried to get some kind of rightness into improvisations. The arrogance implied by getting something right the first time is incredible, but no matter how much an ice-skater practices, when she hits the ice it’s all a one-time event” (Set in Motion 125). Here, the speaker’s claim that to “write it right” is problematic corresponds to how the poet explores language in Garbage. Later in the book, it becomes clear that language cannot escape its “meaning” or connotations no matter how much it is recreated, recycled, or cleansed:

meaninglessness is the

providence, the wiping clear of planes where we  
can structure possibility into whatever housings

level out: the antecedent of meaning is not  
meaning always, meaning which could direct,

delimit, interfere, but the absence of meaning:  
we should be pretty happy with the possibilities

and limits we can play through emergencies free  
of complexes of Big Meaning, but is there

really any meaninglessness

\*\*\*

there is truly only meaning,  
 only meaning, meanings, so many meanings,  
 meaninglessness becomes what to make of so many  
 meanings (emphasis in original; Ammons, G 86)

The initial praise for “meaninglessness” in this passage is related to the speaker’s desire to “write it right” or make it authentic. Only when language is free of “meaning which could direct, / delimit, interfere,” a discussion that appears to mirror the earlier consideration of fixity as opposed to flexibility, can it remain fresh and free to express the reality of the moment. Meaning, the ultimate goal of language, restricts “possibilities.” Despite the pitfalls of meaning, the speaker concludes that “there is only meaning” and “so many meanings,” in fact, that they bring a sense of “meaninglessness.” In other words, when there are so many meanings that words can mean many things at once, the result is no meaning at all.

Recognizing multiple meanings in this passage, the speaker engages in a meta-poetic commentary on language that both connects to the central garbage image and explains his own self-proclaimed poetic failure. Returning to a reading of the garbage metaphor in relation to language, the discussion of meaning here is particularly relevant to a broader discussion of how language re-emerges from the landfill. While a traditional eco-poetic reading might argue that words emerge purified, this passage demonstrates that regardless of change or cleansing, language continues to point to meanings because it is always infused with its multiple usages and contexts. In this passage, then, it becomes clear that the union of nature and culture within the landfill does not allow words to be

new, a reality that prompts the speaker to acknowledge his own inevitable failure. The impending failure of language that concludes section two of the book begins when the speaker comments on the contribution of culture to humanity. When he engages purely with the mind, he reaches an impasse, unable to “write it right.” Realizing the inability of language to accurately express the impossible “eternal” that the mind seeks, the speaker begins again in section three by accepting the limitations of language and thus the poem, limitations that are reiterated throughout the remainder of the book.

The speaker specifically articulates his own failure and his persistence despite it. In doing so, he foregrounds the limitations of language and the poem, claiming, “I have to start / again from a realization of failure” (Ammons, G 56). In this meta-poetic moment, the speaker comments on the inevitable failure of the poem. Beginning with the “realization of failure,” he foregrounds the inability of the poem to ever truly express the reality behind it. Despite the failure, though, he is compelled to write, claiming that his

rhetoric goes on, though, with a terrible

machine-like insistence whether potholes  
appear in the streets or not, or knots in my

line, or furriers in my traps (Ammons, G 57)

Referring to his writing as “rhetoric” and likening it to “machine-like insistence” to produce, the speaker explains that despite its inability to express accurately, writing persists. He relents that his writing is filled with “potholes,” “knots,” and “furriers” that complicate meaning but despite those divergences, the writing meanders toward meaning. Foregrounding language’s limitations in this way is central to unnatural ecopoetics. In recognizing these boundaries, poetry approaches poetic expressions of the world

tentatively and fully cognizant and forthcoming about its own limitations. Voros contends that Garbage “express[es] anxiety and rage that language is not only futile when one is seeking dialogue with nature but may itself be a wasteful by-product of twentieth-century consumer society, cluttering up the cultural landscape, embalming ideas (as landfills mummify material waste”, adding to the junk heap of culture” (“Earth’s Echo” 94). Voros tints the discussion of language toward a traditional ecopoetic recognition of political action and activism both in relation to nature via consumerism, and language via poetic waste, which is certainly a vein that runs throughout the book. However, when considered from the perspective of unnatural ecopoetics, her discussion of the “anxiety and rage,” which permeates attempts to dialogue with nature or culture, can be read as frustration with approaches too narrowly focused on language. For the speaker, these approaches are remedied by expressing the frustration through the foregrounding of poetic limits. The acknowledgment of such foregrounding is unique to unnatural ecopoetics because traditional understandings of the field imply parity between the physical world and its expression in language. By accepting and highlighting language’s limitations, though, unnatural ecopoetic readings consider more accurately the multiple elements, including the author’s own subjective perspective and style, that compose a literary expression of real-world experience.

An unnatural ecopoetic reading of Garbage thus contends that the failure of language articulated throughout the book brings with it the acknowledgement that words, while not pure, remain significant. This reading ties directly to the book’s central image of trash and its relation to how words function and change. Aside from recognizing the limitations of language, the second major argument of such a reading is that words

emerge from the landfill altered by the grime of natural degeneration, but are more accurate to the world when dipped in the naturalcultural filth of the trash heap. In one of the book's late puzzling moments, the speaker appears to comment on the enhanced possibility of language that is tied to both the physical and human worlds:

the other side of anything is worth  
 nearly as much as the side: the difference  
 so slight in fact, that one goes out to see if  
 it is there: I want a curvature like the  
 arising of a spherical section, a sweep that  
 doesn't break down from arc into word, image,  
 definition, story, thesis, but all these  
 assimilated to an arch of silence, an interrelation  
 permitting motion in stillness: I want to see  
 furrows of definition, both the centerings of  
 furrow and the clumpy outcastings beyond: I do  
 not want to be caught inside for clarity: I  
 want clarity to be a smooth long bend  
 disallowing no complexity in coming clean (Ammons, G 92-3)

Here, the speaker begins by acknowledging the multiple meanings or sides of all things (“the other side of anything is worth / nearly as much as the side”) and explains that the promise of multiple meanings inspires individuals to take action (“one goes out to see if / it is there”). Immediately connecting idea to action, this passage ties the discussion to language, a connection that is made more explicit when he explains that he wants “a curvature” “that doesn't break down from arc into word, image, / definition, story, thesis.” In calling for an “arc,” a physical shape, that cannot be broken down into its parts, namely its narrative roles, but instead remains one complete whole, the speaker

seeks something that fuses the physical with language. The fusion that he seeks would create something physical and composed in part of language, but still silent (“all these / assimilated to an arch of silence, an interrelation / permitting motion in stillness”). The silence that the speaker calls for here is predicated on a movement away from being “caught inside for clarity,” a direct connection to the inside/outside or nature/culture dichotomy that permeates this unnatural eco-poetic reading. Claiming that he does not want to be “caught inside” in order to attain clarity and “definition,” he declares that what he wants is a clarity that emerges slowly and smoothly from an acceptance of complexity (“I / want clarity to be a smooth long bend / disallowing no complexity in coming clean”).

Unnatural eco-poetic critique considers this passage for its attention to “interrelation” and investigates this union in relation to the book’s central image of the landfill. Here, the speaker explains that words are inadequate in themselves because they are “caught inside” a search for “clarity” that hinges only on singular definitions rather than “furrows of definition” that are composed both of those popular meanings at the center and those unseemly connotations on the periphery (“both the centerings of / furrow and the clumpy outcastings beyond”). As the speaker ties his discussion to language and definition, he calls for a language that is composed of multiple meanings and infused with the physicality of shape (“an arch”). In this way, as the speaker articulates his goals in this passage—his desire for a single channel for both complex language and the physical world—he meanderingly explains the central thrust of the book. Garbage is a text that demonstrates not a recycling but, alternatively, a muddying of language that occurs through the metaphor of the landfill. As words enter and re-emerge from the trash



heap, they are changed into objects infused with the natural and cultural debris that accompanied them through the dump. In this way, a word emerges precisely as what the speaker claims to seek—“a sweep that / doesn’t break down from arc into word, image, / definition, story, thesis” but instead something that holds “all these / assimilated” into a single force. Language cannot be distinguished as language in and of itself after working through the landfill and thus one cannot remain “caught inside” the linguistic system, searching “for clarity” from within, but instead must turn outward toward the “complexity” and connectedness of the physical world to make meaning.

### **Conclusion**

Unnatural ecopoetics presents a new approach to poets like Ammons, who have traditionally been read for their connections to the natural world without fully considering how those ties are troubled in the texts. While reading early poems like “Corsons Inlet” as mimetic or attempting to mirror the natural world may help elucidate the poetics of that piece and even that historical moment, critics must consider how developments in personal, technological, and social spaces might change a writer’s poetics over time. For Ammons, early poems like “Corsons Inlet” are only beginning to explore the relationship between the natural world and the human perceiver, but late poems like Garbage stem from the poet’s own experience and the changes that have unraveled around him. Exposed to a world of rapidly developing and engulfing technology and faced with the anxiety of failure that plagues many aging poets, the Ammons of Garbage explores the human relationship with the physical world with more complexity and doubt over his ability to succeed than his earlier texts. Recognizing these developments as a central part

of his later work, unnatural eco-poetics reveals that the poet continues to examine the nature/culture binary that is embedded in his earlier work by acknowledging its codependence.

When Ammons proclaims that “garbage has to be the poem of our time,” he explicitly tells the reader that this later text emerges out of a set of physical and cultural realities of waste that are caused largely by technological advances of the late twentieth century. Yet, this aspect of the text is often supplanted by traditional eco-poetic readings that emphasize nature over culture and are perhaps better suited to the poet’s earlier work. Unnatural eco-poetics contends that Garbage uses the trash heap as “the poem of our time” because the rise of a commodified technology culture has created a new environment in which the natural world is no longer distinguishable from the cultural space. In this contemporary natureculture, all things are constantly becoming waste as it quickly cycles through the flash of its own relevance. Acknowledging the poet’s interest in naturecultures rather than nature or culture in isolation as previous critics have, unnatural eco-poetics exposes a new direction of inquiry in Ammons scholarship, where the cultural is not secondary to the natural but a necessary part of it. Reading Garbage in this way reveals that naturalcultural unions are present in a wide variety of texts, including those that are traditionally recognized as examples of eco-poetics for their attention to the natural world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FROM PERCEPTION TO TEXT IN LYN HEJINIAN'S MY LIFE

In her essay “The Rejection of Closure” (2000),<sup>xxxv</sup> Lyn Hejinian observes that “[t]he meaning of a word in its place derives both from the word’s lateral reach, its contacts with its neighbors in a statement, and from its reach through and out of the text into the outer world, the matrix of its contemporary and historical reference” (Language of Inquiry 50). Hejinian emphasizes that words must be determined by their context and continually rejuvenated to match that context. Throughout her poetry, the connections between perception, language, and experience are at the core as the poet struggles with how to best express the complexities or, in her terms, multiplicity<sup>xxxvi</sup> of experience in the limited form of language. Although this pronounced struggle with perception and language becomes increasingly articulate in her later work, it is formative in My Life (1980),<sup>xxxvii</sup> her most popular and seemingly most personal text. The book, which is presented as autobiographical, reveals that even in the rendering of the most personal moments and events, the poet is pulled in multiple directions at once, always trapped behind the limitations of the words themselves and the boundaries of her own perception. The poet’s struggle to express the multiplicity of her own life experiences, including their natural and cultural infusions, in the limited medium of language compels her toward

formal experimentation, language play, and meta-poetic commentary that reveals the text's own limitations, making it ripe for an unnatural eco-poetic reading that can specifically acknowledge the foregrounded textual space created by the poet and its exposure of natural-cultural entanglements. Through this lens, it becomes clear that Hejinian creates her autobiography not by telling stories of her past that are only weak copies of the event itself but by textually recreating the multiplicity of original material experiences on the page and preserving their complex interrelations with the non-material elements of those encounters.

Specifically approaching My Life from the perspective of eco-poetics or even ecocriticism is somewhat radical since the poet's work does not include traditional environments and makes little reference to natural elements. In fact, her work is entirely unnatural, both literally in terms of setting and figuratively in its exploration of the functions and abilities of language in documenting her life experiences. However, there is some precedent for connecting material experience with text in Hejinian's poetics. Marjorie Perloff, Megan Simpson, and Charles Altieri have considered how Hejinian's inquiries into language work toward a more accurate expression of experience, which, in my view, propels criticism toward questions about the relationship between the physical world and linguistic expressions of it in her work that are central to the eco-poetic approach taken up here. Megan Simpson contends in Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing (2000), "[t]hat reality is a process, and a person's knowledge of reality is also therefore a process—something experienced rather than something possessed—is a central motivating assumption behind Lyn Hejinian's poetics" (12). Identifying the gap between how one perceives and understands

their lived experience and the experience itself, Simpson rightly identifies the centrality of the physical encounter to the poet's writing. While she appears centrally concerned with telling the story of her life, Hejinian's work is largely occupied with navigating the disjunction between an original event and conceptions of it.

For the poet, contending with the subjectivity inherent in her perception of lived experience demands a poetics that acknowledges its own limitations. Like Simpson, in Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts (1998), Charles Altieri argues that Hejinian's poems often demonstrate "a refusal to submit subjective play to the logic of meaning, as if apparent arbitrariness were the price necessary to maintain an overall aura of singular purposiveness resistant to all categorical frameworks" (178). Altieri posits that the subjectivity of experience is maintained in the poet's writing by turning away from "the logic of meaning," a move that explains her disjunctive style while simultaneously revealing the prominence of subjectivity in her poetics. As Marjorie Perloff writes in Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media (1991), the poet's ability to formally adapt real-world encounters to text is through "reluctance" and a "deferral of meaning and denial of plenitude that is central to Hejinian's conception of writing" (168). Altieri and Perloff, among others, reveal that throughout Hejinian's writing the turn away from fixity and objectivity facilitate the creation of textual spaces that attempt to create the subjective experience of the physical world on the page.

In her process of highlighting subjectivity, the poet reveals the power that language holds in communicating and shaping conceptions of experience. Simpson observes that "Hejinian's many poetic works—open, elliptical, ongoing—demonstrate and explore the epistemological problem of 'the real' that we are faced with when we

acknowledge that language plays more than a merely descriptive role in our knowledge of the world” (12). The power that language attains in the poet’s work is arguably a central aspect of her poetics. As a result of its prominence, in fact, many scholars read Hejinian for her connection to language writing. In Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry (2010), for instance, David Huntsperger positions Hejinian as a language poet who is principally concerned with politics (13). Although the poet’s political agenda is not particularly relevant to this discussion, Huntsperger reveals that her poetry is uniquely rooted in real-world issues. It appears, then, that Hejinian’s ability to embrace subjectivity and express the disjunction inherent in lived experience is rooted in her connection to language poetry.

### **Language Poetry, New Materialisms, and Eco poetics**

What is perhaps less clear than Hejinian’s incontrovertible roots in language writing is the link between language poetry and eco poetics. While some eco poetic theorists and scholars might contend that the language writing movement’s political connections<sup>xxxviii</sup> are similar to the environmental activism at the heart of some traditional eco poetic theories, the connection between eco poetics and language writing runs much deeper. While language poetry appears entirely disconnected from the physical world and certainly from traditional ideas of nature, it is deeply invested in analyzing modes of perception and the presence of subjectivity in everyday experience. In Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue (1992), Linda Reinfeld specifically defines the movement in these terms when she contends that it produces “a poetry both conceptually sophisticated and elegantly made that embodies a sense of language rooted not in some vague sentimental

conception of nature but in the specific constructions of thought” (3). In essence, the movement considers the reality of how individuals conceive of experience and ultimately how those experiences are expressed in language.

Similarly to Reinfeld, in Everybody’s Autonomy: Collective Reading and Collective Identity (2001), Juliana Spahr identifies language writing in relation to disjunction. She contends that

Western languages support and are supported by the mercantile tendencies of society, which valorize that which can be counted: the grammatical subject/object. The subject of the sentence is always an object—a person, place, or thing—and is given hierarchical priority. . . . The emphasis on disjunction and the nonstandard grammatical economy that accompanies much language writing challenges the assumption that language is an individual affair, a segregated mode of expressive correspondence that is unconnected to larger social apparatuses. (Spahr 56)

For Spahr, language writing’s upheaval of narrative standards is directly related to a turn against social norms that impose limitations on language. Through language writing, the poet can liberate him or herself from those limitations and become “unconnected” from those social systems that might inhibit meaning. Spahr’s understanding of the field is not radically dissimilar from mainstream definitions of it. In the first issue of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine published in 1978, Lawrence Weiner writes, “It (language) seems to be the least impositional means of transferring information concerning the relationships of human beings with materials from one to another (source)” (8). Language poetry, then, is embarking on the “least impositional” method of expressing the complexity of real-world experiences, a sentiment that lies at the core of ecopoetics.

Understanding language poetry as complementary to ecopoetic theory is

complicated by the disparity present in conceptions of both terms. While the term ecopoetics is riddled with a lack of clarity among its proponents, language poetry is similarly muddled as it is used to refer to a wide array of poetic approaches. As Perloff explains, “the language movement has always been an umbrella for very disparate practices; moreover, now that it is over a decade old, it has, like any other movement, displayed internal conflicts and ruptures” (Radical Artifice 174). Some critics contend that language poetry is primarily about disjunction while others argue that it is its connection to the reader that comprises language writing, and still others view it as a mode of politicized response to social issues. In “Re-thinking ‘Non-retinal Literature’: Citation, ‘Radical Mimesis,’ and Phenomenologies of Reading in Conceptual Writing,” Judith Goldman attempts to prioritize the movement’s concerns when she contends, “Perhaps the most important commonality among Language poetries' strategies and self-understandings was the cultivation of de-reifying, participatory forms of readership through the agency of disjunction and fragmentation. Fracturing words, syntax, and narrative diminishes extra-textual reference—a function that masks social control by presenting language as transparent—in favor of re-routing signifying processes to reveal oppressive social coding” (par. 3). In a sense, then, language poetry participates in a number of moves with the larger goal of revealing the outside influences that impinge upon conceptions and expressions of lived experience.

It is the shift toward lived experience that prompts many scholars of language writing to consider the subjective experiences of both the reader and writer in the movement. In The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History (1996), for instance, Bob Perelman observes that “language writing is best understood as



a group phenomenon, and that it is one whose primary tendency is to do away with the reader as a separable category” (31). Similarly, in his essay, “The Politics of, the Politics in” (1987), Jed Rasula, a scholar who has since worked extensively on ecopoetics,<sup>xxxix</sup> contends that language writing is compelled toward “the restoration of the reader as coproducer of the text and an emphasis on the materiality of the signified” (319).

Pointing both toward the role that the reader plays in shaping a text and the importance of the material or physical, both Perelman and Rasula emphasize language writing’s destabilization of complete and objective poetic expression. Recognizing that the reader’s subjective experience of the text plays a significant role in the text itself and coupling that realization with the poet’s effort to express both natural and unnatural material objects or experiences on the page, the potential of an unnatural ecopoetic critique of language poetry is clear. Through this lens, the variety of elements that shape not only the reader but, perhaps more importantly, the writer, move to the fore.

Critical examinations of language writing and poetry reveal that it is not as far removed from ecopoetic theory as it might initially appear. In fact, many of the tenets of language poetry are remarkably similar to more recent trends in new materialism, discussed in this dissertation’s introduction, which are central to the unnatural ecopoetic theory I propose. Serpil Oppermann gestures toward the connections that might exist between these seemingly disparate fields in “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych” (2012)<sup>xl</sup> when she explains:

The old conceptions of matter as stable, inert, and passive physical substance, and of the human agent as a separate observer always in control, are being replaced here by the new posthumanist models that effectively theorize matter's inherent vitality. In ecological postmodern terminology, we are witnessing a ‘re-enchantment’ of nature, and material

ecocriticism is a significant contributor to this new paradigm. Evidently, it is the primary ecocritical expression of postmodern materialism. Examining how matter and meaning, bodies and texts, perception and experience intra-act with cultural productions and social systems, material ecocriticism becomes important as a heuristic model of postmodern materialism. (465)

Here, Oppermann posits that new materialisms, more specifically material ecocriticism, are changing perspectives of the physical world or matter by recognizing that the physical and the cultural (“matter and meaning, bodies and texts, perception and experience”) are intertwined to the point that they are indistinguishable from one another. Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to outline new materialisms or material ecocritical theory, triangulating new materialisms with language poetry and eco-poetics reveals that naturalcultural intra-action<sup>xli</sup> is changing the direction of contemporary poetry criticism and perhaps even inspiring radical new forms that are more capable of accommodating it. Through an unnatural eco-poetic examination of Hejinian, it is evident that new materialist ideas about naturalcultural intra-action push up against language poetry’s self-awareness and textual play, an interaction that facilitates the creation of new textual spaces that are capable of expressing naturalcultural environments on the page.

### **Hejinian’s Poetics**

Hejinian’s work has long demonstrated a profound interest in language and form, but within her poetics she also enters into an examination of materiality, discovering that experiences are shaped through the interactions of various elements rather than any single element in isolation. Throughout her career, she has always been suited to the kind of unnatural eco-poetic critique proposed here but some of her work, especially My Life,

makes her connections between a variety of elements such as personal experience, language, and form most apparent. In this sense, the poet's work illustrates how language poetry, new materialisms, and ecopoetics converge. The poet explains, "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" (Hejinian, Language of Inquiry 56). For the poet, the limitations of language, the facet of her poetics that aligns her with the language poetry movement, are precisely what allow objects and events in the physical realm to become knowable. It is the interaction of world and word that facilitates being. In other words, through language's interaction with the world it purports to express, things are "differentiated" and attain individuality. Recognizing that her work engages with new materialist ideas alongside her roots in language poetry in an effort to better understand and express lived experiences, an unnatural ecopoetic reading emerges as an apt tool for Hejinian scholarship.

While unnatural ecopoetic critique is well-suited to My Life, Hejinian contends that she begins moving toward the materially-infused poetics even earlier. She claims that her first book, Writing is an Aid to Memory (1978), explores how "[l]anguage gives structure to awareness. And in doing so it blurs, and perhaps even effaces, the distinction between subject and object, since language is neither, being intermediate between the two" (Language of Inquiry 23). Here, the poet expresses a clear interest in subject/object relations, and by exploring language and time in this early book, she examines the breakdown of any clear "distinction between subject and object," an impulse that comes to fruition in My Life. Yet, the breakdown of subject and object that language facilitates

is vital in her first book. Writing is an Aid to Memory is an open form text divided into forty-two sections, each of variable length and with lines that stagger from the left margin without any consistent pattern. The poem, perhaps even more so than Hejinian's subsequent work, is radically disjointed and defies any sense of development or connection from one line to the next and often even between words in the same line. As such, the book's form and content call into question fixed structures, like language and narrative, as it disrupts typical patterns and defies comprehension.

Perhaps even more significantly, though, Writing is an Aid to Memory comments on its own form by revealing precisely how and why the poet resists the limitations of traditional language use and how that resistance is related to her engagement with the material world. Although sprinkled throughout the book and deeply encoded in the text, her meta-poetic commentary is most apparent in the final section when she writes:

sign can't be justified in the slaughter  
 in this line basket rake in logic sort done until  
 deaths bore do obstacle to  
 I study is material  
     thoughtfulness collage bit river  
     the test apple bank as material think is  
     sense difference later differ doubt the  
     shape  
 as night scratches understanding never wishes  
     nothing is and no-one is beyond compare because  
     never satisfied  
 brain badly rake harmless second done from my head to my  
 chest  
     where wishes are shot  
 I differ the river to be torn six thing except  
 is kept  
     spent  
     rake material  
     scratch the poor in slaughter  
     terrific river beats looking first to  
 be

of partial length the awful ring of the familiar  
 torn in the second a doubt  
 I am composed of human limbs until no longer capable  
 of nature (Hejinian, Writing is an Aid section 42)

The jumbled lines and disjointed sentiments of this section are representative of the book as a whole, leaving the reader unable to connect thoughts from one line to the next.

However, this section engages in a somewhat sustained examination of language and materiality as it considers the “slaughter” performed by the imposition of the “sign.” In this Saussurian reference, the speaker contends that the “sign can’t be justified” in imposing “logic” and order to the point that the original object or experience becomes irrelevant (“until / deaths bore”). The passage turns instead to the “material” as she outlines the differences between “thoughtfulness” and to “think,” proposing that “thoughtfulness” combines various elements and grants them equal agency (“thoughtfulness collage bit river / the test apple bank as material”) whereas to “think” is to impose order and categorization by dividing elements from one another (“think is / sense difference later differ doubt the / shape”). Privileging the noun over the verb, the speaker presents the former as cohesive and inclusive whereas the latter is intrusive and divisive. The divisiveness persists as she comments on the “the river” and the “terrific river beats” of it being “torn” apart by “the ring of the familiar,” a reference that might be tied to the speaker’s humanity that appears in the following lines. It is the human push for understanding, logic, and categorization—the verb thinking—that distances her from the river and nature altogether (“I am composed of human limbs until no longer capable / of nature”). The speaker’s realization in this passage is a meta-poetic reflection on the book itself, which distances itself from the limitations of human logic and thought by

discarding the need for “familiar” narrative structure or even comprehension. Writing is an Aid to Memory, then, demonstrates an inclusive “thoughtfulness,” in which multiple elements of place and experience are preserved and permitted to intra-act free of artificially imposed connection or detachment.

Not only in this early work but throughout her career, Hejinian’s poetics balances between an effort to express the multiplicity that constitutes real-world experience and an impulse to reveal the inability of the text to ever fully express such openness. In The Language of Inquiry, she explains that her methodology emerges from the realization that humans are plagued “by the struggle between language and that which it claims to depict or express, by our overwhelming experience of the vastness and uncertainty of the world, and by what often seems to be the inadequacy of the imagination that longs to know it—and, furthermore, for the poet, the even greater inadequacy of the language that appears to describe, discuss, or disclose it” (49). In her quest for the radically open poem,<sup>xlii</sup> the poet contends with the complexity of experience and the expression of that multifaceted encounter in text. In essence, then, the poet’s work is grounded in a naturalcultural struggle to textually express the intra-actions that constitute the experiences of everyday life. Although in the coming pages we will consider how this sentiment lies at the heart of Hejinian’s most famous book, the naturalcultural impulse that drives unnatural ecopoetic readings of her work are specifically outlined in one of her most recent books, Happily (2000), which, Bob Perelman contends, has the single message “[t]hat things exist, person-size, sentence-size” (qtd. in Hejinian, Happily, Back Cover). The overt materiality at the heart of Hejinian’s small, thirty-nine page book helps to uncover how her earlier attempts, in My Life and elsewhere, to bring together natural, cultural, personal, and

textual aspects of experience are grounded in both an interest in experience as multi-dimensional and an examination of language's ability to preserve that complexity. Her unnatural ecopoetics, then, emerges from the recognition of these poetic moves as naturalcultural approaches to lived experience.

Through an unnatural ecopoetic reading, critics become aware that in Happily, the speaker's lived experiences remain present but the text is over-run by an abundance of meta-poetic commentary on the nature of experience. Examining the multiplicity of experience throughout the text, the book engages with Hejinian's concept of the "open text" on a highly theoretical level and perhaps more fully than in any of her previous books. In one of the most overt examples of this meta-poetics, the speaker states:

The experiences generated by sense perception come by the happenstance  
that is with them  
Experiences resulting from things impinging on us  
There is continuity in moving our understanding of them as they appear  
Some which are games bring with them their own rules for action which is  
a play we play which we may play with an end we value not  
winning  
The dilemmas in sentences form tables of discovery of things create to  
create the ever better dilemma which is to make sense to others  
\*\*\*  
Happinesses are not events that not a time can be taken for  
States of intuition may be only sudden  
Now is a blinding instant one single explosion but somehow some part of  
it gets accentuated  
And each time the moment falls the emphasis of the moment falls into  
time differently (emphasis in original; Hejinian, Happily 26-7)

In this passage, the speaker expresses both a profound interest in materiality and a preoccupation with language's ability to express it. The passage's engagement with materiality is reminiscent of the previous discussion of Writing is an Aid to Memory as it grants agency to things and embraces the diverse elements that compose experience. By

connecting the “experiences” of “sense perception” with the “happenstance” that accompanies them, the speaker initiates a closer examination of the reality of lived experience. Realizing that “[e]xperiences” result from “things impinging on us” and require continual adjustment to integrate new “things” or happenstances (“There is continuity in moving our understanding of them as they appear”), she reveals that often those “things” change the experience altogether (“Some which are games bring with them their own rules for action which is a play we play”). Read through the lens of unnatural eco-poetics, this passage demonstrates that material objects or “things” outside of the human body are granted agency as they “impinge” on the human. Responding to the materiality of experience a few lines later, she reveals that “[h]appinenses are not events” that can be quantified and stabilized, but feelings (“States of intuition”) that are instantaneous. In fact, these feelings are overwhelmingly complex and multiple, so much so that the speaker states that the moment is “a blinding instant one single explosion.”

The unnatural eco-poetic critique becomes particularly relevant in a reading of this passage when it becomes evident that the material and nonmaterial elements of experience are tied up with an examination of the words that seek to express the encounter. As the speaker acknowledges that experiences are multiple and accompanied by peripheral, often irrelevant data or “happenstance,” she turns to the role of writing in expressing that complexity. Claiming that “[t]he dilemmas in sentences form tables of discovery of things,” the speaker comments on the ways that writing organizes the chaos of “happenstance” into “tables” or categories that facilitate understanding. Put another way, through writing, the overwhelming is made perceptible. In Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History (1999), Paul Naylor contends that, for Hejinián,



“restlessness manifests itself in the signifying process—not as an aberrational breakdown but as a constitutive activity: an activity revealing that language, like the text and like the self, is an event rather than an object” (136). As such, even as the speaker concludes that the moment is overwhelming and blinding in its complexity, she concedes that writing makes sense of the overwhelming instant by recording it in time (“each time the moment falls the emphasis of the moment falls into time differently”). Happily, then, is a poetic space where the material and nonmaterial elements of real-world experience are thrust together with the limitations of language as the poet attempts to navigate both simultaneously. As we have seen from her earlier work, this is a thread that runs throughout Hejinian’s poetics but becomes more overt in this later text. In a sense, the unnatural eco-poetics in the poet’s work is methodologized in Happily as she overtly comments both on the materiality of lived experience and the limitations inherent in her own limited language and form while simultaneously exploring those limits through text.

### **The Unnatural Eco-poetics of My Life**

In her comments on My Life, Hejinian contends that the text “gives the impression that it begins and ends arbitrarily and not because there is a necessary point of origin or terminus, a first or last moment. The implication (correct) is that the words and the ideas (thoughts, perceptions, etc.—the materials) continue beyond the work. One has simply stopped because one has run out of units or minutes, and not because a conclusion has been reached nor 'everything' said” (Language of Inquiry 47). The poet’s engagement with this philosophy is apparent through the publication history of My Life, which evolves and gains complexity in multiple versions that appear throughout the poet’s life.

The book was first published in 1980, when Hejinian was 37 years old, and consisted of 37 sections of 37 sentences each. In 1987, the poet released an updated version that contained 45 sections of 45 sentences, corresponding to her age at the time. Finally, in 2003, Hejinian released My Life in the Nineties, a reiteration of the earlier texts' information from the perspective of the more aged poet.<sup>xliii</sup> The changes in the book's form are reminiscent of the poet's own claim that "words" and "ideas" develop and "continue beyond the work." In essence, My Life performs the poet's life as closely as possible by evolving with her and this mimetic statement is a connection between word and world that the text struggles to both challenge and embrace.

In most readings of My Life, the evolving structure of the text is viewed in relation to language, form, and genre. Scholarship on the book considers everything from its interest in how language represents physical reality and form expresses the dynamism of lived experience to its relationship to autobiography. Approaches to the book from the perspective of language are common largely as a result of Hejinian's well-known connections to the language movement and as a result of the text's unusual prose form, which is often attributed to language writing. For instance, Naylor articulates such a critical perspective through what he identifies as "restlessness" in the book. He contends that "restlessness manifests itself in the signifying process—not as an aberrational breakdown but as a constitutive activity: an activity revealing that language, like the text and like the self, is an event rather than an object" (Naylor 136). Considering how the text's form relates to its larger commentary on the relationship between language and material reality, Naylor's approach is representative of a large swath of scholarship on My Life. Though, for some critics, like Simpson, the link between language and lived

experience is more prominent in the book. She observes that for Hejinian “context, including language, is constitutive of all knowing. Since what we know and how we know can never be separated from the process of knowing, objective, final knowledge—scientific certainty—can never be secured. Some uncertainty or doubt will always remain” (emphasis in original; Simpson 15). Both for Simpson and Naylor, language is central in the book because of its inevitable commentary on the gaps between perception, understanding, and expression.

In alternative approaches to the dominant tactic of investigating language in the text, some critics consider how the text’s autobiographical roots are significant to readings of it. Huntsperger clearly articulates the important role of the book’s generic connections to autobiography when he writes, “[w]e have, then, an interesting formal problem: a procedural poem that foregrounds the autobiographical origins of its constraints even as it subverts the conventions of autobiography” (132). He argues that the poem’s procedural form coupled with its “autobiographical origins” facilitates the book’s upheaval of the genre of autobiography, making such sentiments a central concern of the book. Similarly to Huntsperger, in “The Mnemonics of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian’s My Life,” Hilary Clark contends that the nuances of the poem are linked to its commentary on autobiography. She argues, “My Life challenges the view that the events of a life form an ordered sequence culminating in an always-foreseen fullness of being—the writer’s present life and vocation” (Clark 316). For Clark, the book’s central purpose is to challenge the assumption that is so prominent in most autobiographies that events unfold chronologically. Approaches to Hejinian’s text from the perspective of autobiography reveal that the book’s unique challenge to the conventions of a popular

genre might reflect its larger interest in challenging other fixed forms and boundaries.

Building on these earlier approaches to the text, an unnatural ecopoetic reading of My Life reveals that Hejinian's autobiography is atypical of the genre of autobiography not only because it challenges standard characteristics, including a chronological structure and clear narrative, but, more importantly, because she foregrounds the inability of her words to accurately depict the original event and instead attempts to mimic her own subjective, fragmented, and disjointed experience of the event's multiplicity on the page. As the poet explains, "[i]n 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" (Hejinian, Language of Inquiry 56). Including the many memories, tangents, physical sensations, and distractions that composed the event itself, her text demonstrates a tendency—that is prominent in my unnatural ecopoetic method—to preserve the chaotic non-narrative that dominates real-world experience. As unnatural ecopoetics reveals, humans do not experience only one sense or even one moment at a time, but are always overwhelmed with subjective distractions, such as memory and mental wandering, and the countless elements of the environment that, if not filtered, would confuse and overwhelm. In My Life, though, the poet chooses not to filter her experiences but instead to maintain the fragmented, disjointed, and often confusing reality of them on the page.

The opening of My Life demonstrates the book's suitability to unnatural ecopoetic readings by emphasizing the many, often disjointed elements that contribute to

one's perception of lived experiences and by turning toward the everyday fusion of multiple elements, ranging from natural to material to emotional forces, that shape an encounter. From the beginning of the book, the poet thrusts memories and emotions from her own life into observations on the natural world, revealing the important influence of both the physical and the personal on experience. The book begins:

A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple—though moments are no longer so colored. Somewhere, in the background, rooms share a pattern of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does. In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity. The better things were gathered in a pen. The windows were narrowed by white gauze curtains which were never loosened. Here I refer to irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes. Hence, repetitions, free from all ambition. The shadow of the redwood trees, she said, was oppressive. The plush must be worn away. On her walks she stepped into people's gardens to pinch off cuttings from their geraniums and succulents. An occasional sunset is reflected on the windows. A little puddle is overcast. (Hejinian, *My Life* 7)

In this opening passage, the naturalcultural fusions of Hejinian's work become particularly apparent. Thrusting together elements of personal childhood memories, adult reflection on them, contemplations on the nature of perception, commentary on writing, and a consideration of the supposed nature/culture gap, the speaker in this passage engages fully in a naturalcultural experience. The movement between these various elements is subtle, happening without warning and rapidly leaping from one moment or reflection to the next. The book remains true to its autobiographical genre and begins with a gesture toward childhood perception as the speaker recounts a time in her life when moments were "colored" in "yellow" and "purple." Although she reveals that "moments are no longer so colored," or imbued with sensory perception and implies that

she grew out of that mode of perception, she bombards the reader with elements of the past both in its initial moment of occurrence, a past that is conceived through the limited perception of a small child, and as it is recounted from the perspective of an adult.

Simpson contends that “[t]he sense that something is always left out or glossed over in memory—that perfect knowledge of reality (in this case, the past as it ‘really’ was) is impossible—is a recurring, circulating theme of this book-length, nonlinear, poetic work in prose” (12). In this passage, the fragmented memories of childhood that are seamlessly tied to the adult contemplation of them highlight the gaps that exist between lived experiences and perceptions of them. The memory of her father returning “home from the war” is infused with the knowledge and understanding of the grown speaker and thus the experience is irreversibly altered from its original form into something entirely new.

Following the inquiry into memory and perception that leaps out of the opening lines, the passage specifically engages with unnatural ecopoetic sentiments through its recognition of the interconnections between the human and nonhuman and its struggle to express those naturecultures on the page. Naturalcultural elements emerge as the speaker fuses the cultural concept of “rooms,” or built structures that house, with the natural concept of “roses” as she proclaims that they share a pattern. The comparison is enhanced a few lines later when the speaker goes on to recall how “The windows were narrowed by white gauze curtains which were never loosened.” Here, the “rooms” are likened to “roses” but their counterpart, the “windows,” are restricted by the “curtains” that permanently hang over them. In this sense, the rooms are permitted to share the pattern of the most culturally commodified flower, the “rose,” but a clear view of the outside world is not permitted and must instead be limited by the curtains. In this moment, the speaker

comments on the inability of the human to ever fully see past the curtains to the real world beyond them; put another way, she acknowledges that the human perceiver is always limited to human senses and never fully outside of the metaphorical house and the restrictions it imposes. Accepting this limitation, the speaker moves beyond a quest to bypass her human self and instead considers how elements in the natural world intertwine with her cultural space. As such, she does not turn to majestic images of nature but instead concludes that such a majestic image as “The shadow of the redwood trees” is “oppressive” and instead looks to less grandiose and more everyday elements of nature that stem up in the garden (“cuttings from their geraniums and succulents”). The garden, a space where nature and culture fully intertwine, allows the speaker to acknowledge that naturalcultural elements emerge subtly in everyday life through moments and images like the reflection of the “occasional sunset” on the “windows” rather than through overt turns toward lofty images of nature.

Still, what makes Hejinian’s text so uniquely suitable to unnatural eco poetic readings, as opposed to broader materialist approaches, is her self-reflective commentary or metapoetics, in which the limitations of the text are observed, recognized, and accepted rather than ignored. The movement in the opening passage of the book toward a naturalcultural sentiment is surrounded by commentary on poetic limitations. The speaker’s claim that “The better things were gathered in a pen,” demands that the passage be considered in terms of writing, a move that specifically prompts an unnatural eco poetic critique rather than the more specialized but narrow material ecocritical reading. Stating that the “better” things are written implies a sense of hierarchy, in which some elements are more valuable and thus more worthy of writing than others. In the

context of the discussion of family, it might be assumed that her family history is written based on those moments that are considered “better” rather than for an accurate depiction of her life. However, the speaker goes on to reveal that she is turning in another direction when she proclaims that in this poem (“Here”) she is turning to “irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes.” As Simpson contends, Hejinian’s work runs “counter to modes of knowing that value objectivity and certainty and that are bent on the acquisition of knowledge as something existing separate from and prior to the means of acquiring and categorizing that prize” (12). The “irrelevance” that she embraces in this moment is a turn away from prioritizing the “better things” from those not worthy of recording and instead a move toward a poem that allows for the irrelevance inherent in real-world experience and thus can minimally “intrude” or alter the original experience.

As the opening passage demonstrates, Hejinian’s unnatural ecopoetic sentiments are clearly expressed in her work through her overt use of metapoetic commentary on writing in general as well as on the genre of autobiography. Acknowledging that the act of perception causes some change to the original experience, the poet embraces and foregrounds the limitations of her own form. Her relationship with language is apparent throughout the book but before considering how the poet approaches language it seems apt to consider the larger critique at the heart of the book—the critique of autobiography. Although many critics read the text from this perspective, *My Life* might be called an autobiography only in the loosest sense of the word. Unlike traditional manifestations of the genre, the poet does not engage in a clear depiction of the events of her life but instead presents a highly complex and largely incomprehensible series of observations, memories, thoughts, and influences. As Simpson observes, “Hejinian’s poetics take the



process, context, and materials of the knowing situation into account as components of the knowing itself, rather than trying to separate knowledge (as a product) from the process of ‘acquiring’ it” (16). In this way, the poet engages with the context of her life in a way that traditional autobiography does not. She acknowledges that her experiences are tied up in a series of elements, including natural and cultural ones that continually intertwine within the mind. As the poet explains, in My Life "the structural unit (grossly, the paragraph) was meant to be mimetic of both a space and a time of thinking" (Hejinian, Language of Inquiry 46). To separate one element out would be inauthentic to the experience because it attempts to isolate one facet of experience from another, a goal that My Life reveals as impossible.

In the book, each sentence is tied to the next not through a clear narrative but through the surprisingly seamless flow from one unrelated thought or observation to the next. The reader is not compelled to continue reading because of an investment in the narrative itself but through a power to piece together the events for him or herself. Spahr contends that the power that the reader holds in interpreting Hejinian’s book is precisely what gives the text such a unique ability to express the true nature of experience. She claims that in “My Life, an attention to a larger world is accompanied by a move to share authority with readers and an accompanying abandoning of authorial privilege” (Spahr 53). In these terms, Hejinian’s language poetry roots shine through in the text as she grants power to the reader to shape the text. Aside from the politically charged roots that such moves have in language poetry, granting the reader authority to interpret and shape the text works ecopoetically. Once the reader is granted freedom and authority to insert him or herself into the text, the apparent subjectivity of the writer becomes balanced by

the subjective experience of the reader. The author's experiences are evaluated and critiqued for their authenticity and recognized for their limitations. As such, the experience of reading the text is as important as the experience of writing it because it allows the text to remain active and flexible to the encounter it seeks to express. The importance of subjectivity in My Life is apparent when the speaker states: "There were more storytellers than there were stories, so that everyone in the family had a version of history and it was impossible to get close to the original, or to know 'what really happened'" (Hejinian 27). The "storytellers" identified in the passage are certainly the poet's family but are also tied to the way the text reveals itself and the events it reconstitutes. Naylor explains this by stating that for Hejinian, "restlessness manifests itself in the signifying process—not as an aberrational breakdown but as a constitutive activity: an activity revealing that language, like the text and like the self, is an event rather than an object" (136). The autobiography does not function for the poet as a simple depiction of events but rather as a flexible space in which an event slowly unfolds in the highly disjointed way that real-life experiences reveal themselves. In other words, Hejinian's autobiography captures the material and nonmaterial elements that constitute her real-world experience and expresses them in the foregrounded textual space of the poem. When read through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, then, the book engages in a complex rendering of experience that includes the many disjointed and peripheral elements that are often overlooked or left out of textual renderings of lived experiences.

While the poet's use of autobiography may initially seem to run counter to the concept of ecopoetics in general, her willingness to embrace naturalcultural elements through her complex "open text" and preserve all facets of her experiences makes her

seemingly self-absorbed and entirely anthropocentric autobiographical poem more authentic to a real-world experience, which is always infused with elements from the past, present, future, as well as subjective wanderings into political, historical, environmental, and personal tangents. Still, to express such sentiments in the text the poet must consider not only the genre but also the medium in which she writes. For Hejinian, writing is a central point of concern throughout her poetics. In My Life, she continually articulates the challenges and limitations of writing through her use of meta-poetic commentary. According to Perelman, Hejinian insists throughout the book that writing must remain in the foreground (73). Writing acts as the center of the book because through it, the poet explores what can and cannot be expressed in text. The speaker articulates the challenges of language subtly throughout the text. In one such instance, she emphasizes the limitations of words overtly:

The inaccessibility of the meaning intrigued me all the more, since I couldn't read the single letters, if that is what they were, the little marks which constitute Persian. Mother dimension; sex. She observed that detail minutely, as if it were botanical. As if words could unite an ardent intellect with the external material world. Listen to the drips. The limits of personality. It's in the nature of language to encourage, and in part to justify, such Faustian longings. Break them up into uncounted continuous and voluminous digressions. (Hejinian, My Life 63)

The speaker is intrigued by her own inability to comprehend or “read” the “letters” or “little marks” before her because they are in “Persian.” The “inaccessibility of the meaning,” though, does not fascinate her only because of its foreignness but only intrigues her “more,” implying an ongoing acceptance that meaning is always out of reach. However, the speaker’s examination of language becomes most overt when she explains that the female “She” examines “detail minutely” as though she were examining

plant life (“as if it were botanical”). Conflating the broad concept of detail with plants, the speaker goes on to explain that it is “[a]s if words could unite an ardent intellect with the external material world.” Here, the text turns toward a pronounced meta-poetic statement as the speaker mocks the idea (“as if”) that language can connect the human intellect to the physical world. Scoffing at the thought that words can somehow bridge this gap, the speaker instead proposes turning to the senses to access the “material world.” She encourages the reader to “Listen to the drips” and, in doing so, acknowledge the “limits” of the human mind (“intellect” and “personality”). Ultimately, she reveals, that it is “the nature of language” to encourage the accessibility or comprehension promised by the intellect but if one instead only listens to the sounds of the world in their many disjointed parts rather than trying to understand it (“Break them up into uncounted continuous and voluminous digressions”), then the senses take control and move beyond the demand for comprehension, logic, and accessibility.

The speaker’s turn toward the experiences of the senses over the limitations of logic and meaning are an attempt to preserve the inaccessibility of lived experience. Naylor argues that “*My Life*, by drawing attention to the limits of language, draws attention to the limits of logic and, more significantly, to the fictive element in the process that produces both language and logic—the signifying process” (123). Much as the speaker in this passage is overwhelmed by the foreign inaccessibility of the words before her, the human observer is constantly overcome by the sensations, elements, thoughts, memories, and emotions that constitute a lived experience. It is only when one ceases to search for understanding and instead embraces the disjointed reality of experience that he or she can access it. In terms of writing, words are presented in this

passage as limiting. Similarly, in a later section, the speaker again turns toward the senses as logic and reason fail to suffice when she states, “It’s hard to make a heart go pal pal pal at description but with that fat music on big feet I go beat beat beat and twitch containment” (Hejinian, My Life 92). The “heart” does not beat for the logic or clarity of “description” but instead for the sensation of “music” that gets the listener on his or her “feet.” The involvement of the perceiver and the activity of the senses intrigues the speaker, providing a means to engage with the world on a much deeper level than simple description can ever provide. In this sense, the speaker concludes that while logic brings accessibility and comprehension, it does not express the true nature of experience. The speaker’s examination of the boundaries of logic and ultimately language here, then, directly comments on Hejinian’s poetics and reveals how an unnatural ecopoetic reading that brings the various elements of her poetics together enlightens understandings of the text. Turning away from comprehensibility through radical formal and narrative experimentation, My Life embarks on a more sensory driven journey on which experience remains realistically disjointed.

The unnatural ecopoetic sentiment that lies at the heart of Hejinian’s poetics gains prominence throughout the text as the poet comments on the limitations of her own form, ultimately foregrounding the boundaries of the book. By highlighting those parameters, the speaker demonstrates to the reader her own awareness of them and allows the book’s boundaries to remain visible throughout the text through constant reminders that a word can never equal the world. The speaker reveals that preserving those limitations is essential to escaping the pull toward the deceptive promises of comprehension, accessibility, and description that writing encourages:

They used to be the leaders of the avant garde, but now they just want to be understood, and so farewell to them. If I was left unmarried after college, I would be single all my life and lonely in old age. In such a situation it is necessary to make a choice between contempt and an attempt at understanding, and yet it is difficult to know which is the form of retreat. We will only understand what we have already understood. (Hejinian, My Life 73)

Commenting on artists who “used to” be considered “avant garde” and radical but sacrificed their rebellion for the drive “to be understood,” the speaker concludes that when faced with such a difficult choice between acceptance and comprehensibility, “[w]e will only understand” those things that “we have already understood.” In this sense, understanding is limiting because it does not evolve or expand but stays the same. She later comments that the restrictions imposed by logical meaning are so pronounced that they consume the original sensation they seek to express: “I remember my fear of personality, which was so similar to the fear of forgetting that the tiniest idea became a ‘nagging thought,’ until I could write it down and out, preserved, but, in a sense, too, eliminated” (Hejinian, My Life 131). Returning to the limits of personality from an earlier passage, the speaker here reveals that her “fear of personality” causes her to fear losing thoughts. Out of that fear, she writes them down. What is perhaps most fascinating here, though, is that the act of recording or writing down the thoughts destroys them (“eliminated”). It is as though her attempt to record thought runs counter to the potential power of writing. In a sense, recording the thought is an attempt to preserve and make it accessible but to do so, the writer must reduce the thought to the logic and limits of language.

The speaker’s ongoing disparagement of language foregrounds the book’s textuality and calls into question the ability of My Life to effectively express Hejinian’s

lived experience in its original form. Since the metapoetics of the text reveals that language is largely limited and can destroy meaning, the poet's attempt to adapt her life to the page appears inherently flawed. However, it is the acknowledgment of those limits that facilitate the text's effectiveness and what makes the book suitable for unnatural eco poetic critique. Making the reader aware of her own dissatisfaction with the reach of language, the poet creates a text that is decidedly artificial but marked by elements of real-world experience. The speaker explains this unnatural eco poetics through metacommentary on her own form:

A paragraph is a time and place, not a syntactic unit. We stood watching circles in the light beside the lake, while in the last sunlight flew a mob of tiny bugs, like motes of dust, doubt, or the code of the trees. More and more lake is contained by the stone thrown into it. The voices of the daughter, the mother, and the mother of the mother are heard in the background, and to their scattered bodies go. So quoted, coded. Things are different but not separate, thoughts are discontinuous but not unmotivated (like a rose without a pause). (Hejinian, My Life 137)

The speaker reveals that the “paragraph” is both temporal and physical (“a time and place”), thus referential to real-world experience, and not purely textual (“not a syntactic unit”). In this moment, the book's unnatural eco poetic sentiments are clearly revealed as the textual space of the book is tied to the material environments that it depicts. While the speaker comments on the idyllic scene of the lake, she fuses the physical world with the textual as she comments on “the code of the trees” and the “quoted, coded” voices in the scene. Ultimately, she reveals that the text and the world are “different but not separate” and that a lack of continuity does not necessarily mean meaninglessness (“thoughts are discontinuous but not unmotivated”). Perelman argues that “[w]hile Hejinian's use of parataxis coexists more amiably with narrative, her sentences are also committed to

breaking up any smooth narrative plane. De-narrativization is a necessary part of construction in these wider paratactic arguments” (78). Commenting on the formal elements of the book as a strategy for more accurately depicting the lived experience than pure description ever can, the poet’s unnatural eco-poetic ties reveal that her text is more than a linguistic space, but one imbued with the materiality of the world around it.

Hejinian’s text is unique in its engagement with materiality, though, because it employs the material through the lens of inevitably subjective experience and within markedly limited modes of textual expression. In My Life, the boundaries of the poem are revealed again and again but the poet successfully triangulates the material with the limits of both perception and text through her use of repetition. In fact, through one key phrase that repeats in various forms throughout the book, the poetics of My Life is revealed. The phrase, “a pause, a rose, something on paper,” which is repeated throughout the book in a variety of forms and contexts, is only one of a number of repeated phrases, a choice that draws attention to both the inexactness of language and the inauthenticity of textual expression.<sup>xliv</sup> Yet, in this particular phrase the poet engages with the lived experience (“a pause”), a material object (“a rose”), and a textual space (“something on paper”), while simultaneously emphasizing, through the imposed artificiality of repetition, the constructedness of language itself.

A closer look at the repeated phrase reveals that its triangulation of subjective experience, the material world, and text lends itself to unnatural eco-poetic critique because it foregrounds the limitations of perception in relation to the complexity of the material world. For Hejinian, the influence of logic on perceptions of lived experience is a central theme throughout the book<sup>xlv</sup> but in this key phrase, the influence of human



thought on the material object is exaggerated. In its various forms, the phrase, “a pause, a rose, something on paper,” might be read as a direct commentary on the distortive influence of thought on the material object. Within the phrase, it seems that in the translation from material reality to text, the rose is transformed from its original self—the flower—to a nondescript “something.” The leap from materiality to textuality is, then, interrupted or distorted, implying a lack of continuity between the two. Interestingly, in the phrase, “a pause” accompanies the translation and brings with it a hesitation in which human thought or perception takes hold. The “pause” stands in for the inevitable subjectivity of experience, in which thoughts begin to shape perceptions of the material and ultimately transform them into something textual but entirely changed. In Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry, David Huntsperger contends that the pause “alludes to some mental or physical act that precedes the perception of the subsequent objects” (144). The “pause” marks the moment that the “rose” is perceived, which forces all perceptions of the rose to be filtered through human thought. Put another way, the “pause” reveals the inability to ever fully escape the influence of human thought or logic and reveals the unavoidable gap between the material and the textual. As the material “rose” is perceived and adapted to language, it is no longer a rose but only “something on paper,” which is unrecognizable not only as a rose but even as a flower.

Hejinian’s repeated phrase is elucidated by an unnatural ecopoetic approach, which recognizes the importance of the poet’s choice to foreground the text’s constructedness. By integrating a phrase so deeply imbued with commentary on perception, text, and materiality into the book through dynamic repetition, the poet knowingly draws attention to the line and its reiteration in a variety of contexts. As it

evolves from its first iteration into a number of others, the phrase is tied to questions about human perceptions of nature (“A pause, a rose, something on paper, in a nature scrapbook”), the inescapability of perception, materiality, and text (“I found myself dependent on a pause, a rose, something on paper”), and the boundaries of textual expression (“A pause, a rose, something on paper implicit in the fragmentary text”) (Hejinian, My Life 16; 28; 55). Connecting these various iterations through the repeated phrase, the poet forces the reader to contend with the multiplicity inherent in each word and the various ways in which those words might be contextualized. In doing so, the words themselves are revealed as fragile and flexible. For Hejinian, the inexactness of language is always dominant but it is the recognition of its limits that allows it to function. By foregrounding the text’s artificial construction, the poet is able to better express the multiple ways in which experience is perceived by human observers and adapted to text. Hejinian’s unnatural ecopoetics, then, emerges most explicitly through the repetition in the book, which foregrounds textual artificiality while meta-poetically exploring both those boundaries of the text and the relationship between subjective relations to lived experience and the material world.

## **Conclusion**

My Life is an unusual text to consider through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics because it is inherently tied to the genre of autobiography, which is typically characterized by unembellished narrative, chronological structures, and engagement with the subjective experiences of the author. However, it is precisely its concern with the relation between human, world, and language that makes Hejinian’s autobiography not

only suitable for unnatural eco-poetic readings but ideal. It is through this lens that readers become aware that the book's unique style and apparent disregard for the conventions of autobiography facilitate an unusual self-awareness through which the authentically inadequate renderings of lived experience reveal the gaps between the lived moment, human perception, and textual expression. For Hejinian, only by embracing such a chasm and foregrounding it in the text can a poem begin to express something meaningful. As a result, in The Language of Inquiry, she asks, "Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? . . . In my opinion, the answer is yes; that is, in fact, the function of form in art. Form is not a fixture but an activity" (Hejinian 47). These words run like a vein throughout My Life as the poet's formal experimentation leads to a text that is utterly true to the disjointed, fragmentary, and multiplicitous nature of lived experiences in the world because of its self-awareness and acceptance of its own inadequateness.

In this way, Hejinian's poetics stands as an example of the necessity of unnatural eco-poetics, a mode of reading that considers both her formal experimentation and her overt meta-poetics. While other approaches to her work acknowledge some facet of her writing, such as language or form, unnatural eco-poetics allows for a more complete analysis of her poetry. Through this lens, readers can begin to recognize the poet's nuanced engagement with material and nonmaterial elements that influence experiences both at the moment of their occurrence and for the adult poet recalling them. By reading her work in this way, then, it becomes clear that unnatural eco-poetics presents new directions for poetry scholarship as it allows readers to consider the poet's formal and

linguistic play alongside more personal reflections on memory and experience. This new brand of ecopoetics recognizes that lived experience is complex, multiple, and often inexpressible but attempts to interact and at least partially express these otherwise inexpressible encounters by approaching them from multiple directions at once. For critics, such an approach opens doors to poets, like Hejinian, who have previously been pigeonholed for their attention to one school or another and allows their work to be read with a more balanced look at the nuances of their poetics. As a reading of Hejinian's complex poetics demonstrates, expressing lived experience on the page is a constant struggle with language, form, experience, and self that unnatural ecopoetics helps to decipher.

### CHAPTER THREE

“THE UNCERTAIN TRUTH OF FICTION”:

#### UNLIKELY ENVIRONMENTS IN SUSAN HOWE’S THE MIDNIGHT

In Susan Howe’s The Midnight (2003), the poet explains that her poetry is “assembling materials for a recurrent return somewhere. Familiar sound textures, deliverances, vagabond quotations, preservations, wilderness shrubs, little resuscitated patterns. Historical or miraculous. Thousands of correlations have to be sliced and spliced” (85). In this sense, the poem’s interconnection of various aspects of culture, history, physical space, and genealogy in a collage that highlights middle spaces is a fusion of the innumerable aspects of a spatial experience, including the natural and unnatural elements of it. The Midnight brings these elements together as it engages in formal and linguistic inquiries into the ability of language to accurately express these many facets of experience in the physical world. Despite its interest in the physical, the book has not been widely read as an ecopoem because it employs history, memory, imagination, and physical experience as well as a fractured, experimental form in order to convey the disjointed reality of experience, in which past and present are often simultaneously thrust together in the mind. However, the presence of these elements prompt me to consider the book through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, which can more fully account for the nuances of Howe’s poetics. Through this reading, the poet’s subtle

meta-poetic commentary, experimental formal structures, and integration of found text work to construct a textual space that expresses real-world experiences. In other words, although the poem jumps between a variety of material spaces and nonmaterial thoughts, memories, histories, and reflections, making its environment unstable throughout, Howe constructs a foregrounded textual environment that captures the multiplicity and simultaneity of experience.

The Midnight is best described as a collage that brings together elements of the poet's personal life, peripheral historical data, linguistic inquiry, and formal play through a generic mingling of prose, poetry, and visual arts. The book is broken into five clearly marked sections, each of which takes on a new form as it jumps back and forth between the three genres. As in most of Howe's books, there is little continuity between lines, words, and even passages, seemingly begging the reader to accept disjunction and confusion but simultaneously prompting him to continue despite its absence through traces of meaning and connection that sporadically emerge and disappear into the text. Although these disjunctions lead many critics to read Howe's work as language poetry, in much the same vein as Hejinian, and recognize it for its inquiries into historical and cultural peripheries, the collage that constitutes her writing ties the poet not only to the various included elements but also to an investigation into the boundaries of language and the physical world. In The Midnight, in particular, the physical domineers the formal dimensions of the book as it is inserted itself into the poetic space through meanderings into the poet's personal life, historical references, and photographs of everything from book pages to portraits; however, these elements spark nonmaterial reflection from the poet, who consistently ties the material aspects of experience to her subjective

experiences of them. While chapter two revealed that Hejinian's poetics foregrounds the physicality of words and the following chapter on the conceptual poetry of Goldsmith argues that he features the agential power of textual space, Howe's writing stands between the two as it foregrounds both the materiality of text and textuality of the physical simultaneously.

Howe's interest in the physical world often goes unnoticed and unexamined in scholarship on her work, preventing ecocritics from fully examining the poet's ties to eco-poetic or ecocritical ideas.<sup>xlvi</sup> The revelations of material ecocriticism that are brought to the fore through unnatural eco-poetics, however, show that when environments are understood not only as natural places but also spaces composed of a particular perceiver's subjective experience of how physical, mental, emotional, textual, and political elements come together to compose an experience in time and space, Howe's poetics emerges as an unlikely but apt site for ecocritical study. Through the lens of unnatural eco-poetics, readers recognize a new thread in Howe's complex poems and can begin to consider not only how her poems comment on text and poetry but also how they reflect on the complex nature of experience in the world.

### **Howe's Poetics**

As her career has developed from its origins in visual arts and theater toward a more elaborate textual poetics, Howe has been read for everything from her feminist undertones to historical recordings to formal techniques. Despite the poet's objection, many critics identify her as a language poet<sup>xlvii</sup> because of her radically experimental forms and others highlight her prominent fascination with history. Marjorie Perloff, Paul

Naylor, Rachel Tzvia Back, and Peter Quartermain have specifically analyzed Howe's poetics in its many forms, each illustrating that the poet's work begs for different theoretical lenses. For most critics working on Howe, the extreme ambiguity and radical experimentation of her writing provokes the reader toward interpretation, a process that not only enhances a poem's meaning but requires it, and for many scholars it engages with history and memory in an effort to draw out the underrepresented voices within it. Lynn Keller observes that "her writing embodies absence in its elliptical and disjunctive character, and in its dramatic use of space on the page. Absence is a thematic preoccupation as well, particularly in Howe's concern with voices that have been silenced, figures who have been erased" (1). Keller's reading represents a fairly common conception of the poet's work. Though, alongside such common interpretations of her work, Howe's writing often garners attention for its attention to landscape or place, concepts that seem particularly foreign to her highly formalized avant-garde poetry. Certainly, history and memory as well as formal experimentation play vital roles in her poetics, but the poet's interest in landscape is largely hidden beneath layers of cultural, personal, and historical explorations that dramatically alter material spaces.

Considering its muted role within the texts, place is recognized in a surprising amount of Howe criticism. In Poetic Investigations: Signing the Holes in History (1999), Naylor observes that in Howe's writing, "the hope of a 'pure' encounter with a natural landscape, disengaged from the political realities of that landscape, is as impossible as the hope of creating an autonomous world of words, detached from the concerns of the real world, in poetry" (54). Contemplating Howe as a "pure poet," Naylor recognizes the ways in which the poet's work is tied not only to natural landscape but also to the



political realities of the “real world.” Put another way, he considers place in the poet’s work as closely tied to both physical landscape and the non-physical elements that constitute places at particular times. Similarly to Naylor, in Led by Language: The Poetry and prose of Susan Howe (2002), Back contends that “Howe’s heritage of displacements has made her more attentive to the centrality of place in one’s emotional makeup and more suspect, perhaps, of ever completely belonging” (9). Commenting both on the poet’s unique formal techniques and her engagement with place, Back considers place a central tenet in the poet’s engagement with personal and cultural history. It is through place that the poet is able to examine her own histories.

While the poet’s engagement with landscape arises in some criticism, even these studies do not adequately account for the extent of the landscape’s influence in her work or the deep level at which her poetics is embedded within environments. Considering the significance of the physical environment in Howe’s work requires a look back at how her work developed from a radically different formal education in visual arts and history in theater. Howe presents an exciting new direction for unnatural ecopoetic critique because her work so prominently relies and is rooted in visual arts, a mode that pulls powerfully away from traditional poetic practice, and uses those methods not to mimic, as in traditional ecopoetics, but to capture the multifaceted reality of experience. Her attention to landscape is, in many ways, tied to her roots in the art world. Trained in visual arts and theater, following her mother, Mary Manning, who was a famous Irish actress, Howe began her career in visual and performance arts, only meandering into poetry through experiential art. In a 1994 interview with Lynn Keller, the poet explains the powerful roots of her poetics in visual art. Howe explains:

Before we moved out of New York I had started making environments—rooms that you could walk into and be surrounded by walls, and one those walls would be collage, using found photographs (again a kind of quotation). Then I started using words with that work. I was at the point where I was only putting words on the walls and I had surrounded myself with words that were really composed lines when a friend, the poet Ted Greenwald, came by to look at what I was doing and said to me: “actually you have a book on the wall. Why don’t you just put it into a book?” (6)

Reading the poet’s work as tied to landscape appears to be apt, although perhaps not attributing as much of her writing to place or environment as Howe’s poetic origins might warrant. For Howe, poetry began in art and, perhaps even more importantly, in environment. As an artist, she assembled rooms of words, forcing her audience to physically enter a textual space as she fused the real world with the poetic realm. Recognizing the photographs that she placed on the walls as “a kind of quotation,” and slowly building toward increasing numbers of words, Howe’s visual art engaged not only with the aesthetic but also with the experiential. The “environments” that she constructed demanded physical engagement from the viewer as well as engagement with visual, textual, and artistic spaces. Howe’s artwork, then, engaged with much the same process as her poetry—demanding the reader’s involvement. It is only when the reader enters her artistic “environment” or the poem that he or she can begin to contribute to its meaning. Bringing with him subjective interpretations, memories, moods, aesthetic preferences, attention to detail, political penchants, among other things, the viewer shapes the experience of the art just as much as the poet’s subjective experience shapes the text. In this sense, the poet’s artwork, like her poetry, demonstrates that one’s subjective experience of place, or art, or event shapes its meaning.

The poet’s acknowledgment of how the subjective experiences make for diverse

interpretations of real-world objects or events, though, reveals that Howe conceptualizes environments or places with more flexibility than most critics of her work concede. Not viewing the term environment as a purely physical phenomenon, as her work in visual arts reveals, she presents environments as multiplicitous, composed of many objective and subjective elements at once. Her conceptions of environment are perhaps most explicit in “Thorow,” the poem that gets the most attention for its use of landscape or place. The poem, whose title derives from a phonetic spelling of Henry David Thoreau, begins with clearly environmental undertones. Since Thoreau is widely viewed as a forefather for environmental thought and sustainable living, Howe’s engagement with his legacy in this poem places particular attention on how she engages with physical landscapes throughout her poetics. “Thorow” appears as the second of three sections in Howe’s 1990 collection, Singularities, and like much of her other work, oscillates between prose and poetry while simultaneously varying line length and page layout. Some pages of the text contain numbered sections, some fill the page, some contain only a few lines, and some are scrambled across the page in various directions. According to Edward Allen in “‘Visible Earshot’: The Returning Voice of Susan Howe” (2012), the poem “enacts the encounter of a remembered self with the great outdoors—the Adirondacks, in this case—and in doing so gives voice to a ‘transcendental subjectivity’ in the first throes of linguistic disorientation” (402-3). As Allen’s critique demonstrates, “Thorow” participates in much the same “disorientation” that marks the poet’s other work. However, the origins of this text in one of the forefathers of American transcendentalism and sustainability readily identifies it with a holistic concept of nature or environment that seems to run counter to the poet’s use of landscape in other texts.

Viewing nature as whole, pure, and revitalizing, the evocation of Thoreau here is quite different than the highly fragmented landscapes or environments identified by other Howe scholars.

However, the poet's connection to Thoreau's experience of environment is her sense of dissolution into environment, where the human and natural become intertwined. In the poem, the speaker documents a journey through wilderness: "In March, 1987, looking for what is looking, I went down to unknown regions of indifferentiation. The Adirondacks occupied me" (Howe, Singularities 40). Like Thoreau, the speaker here articulates a journey into the wild and "unknown" Adirondacks. What is perhaps most interesting about the set-up of the speaker's entry into the wild is her fusion with the place, not only the human entering nature, but also nature entering the human ("Adirondacks occupied me"). In "The Landscapes of Susan Howe's 'Thorow'" (1996), Jenny L. White identifies the poet's refusal to ignore naturalcultural influences when she observes that "Howe foregrounds conflict and works against a linear, narrative, or even coherent representation of place, in form as well as in content. The poem refuses to empty out the landscape it describes, to make it straight-forward or a place of belonging; rather, it focuses on place as contested, particularly in terms of gender, race, and culture" (239). In this way, the poet sets up a unique encounter with the landscape, not only seeing and acting upon nature but where nature acts on the perceiver. Typically this aspect of Howe's poetics warrants little further consideration, but her naturalcultural sentiments in "Thorow" reveal a deeply rooted curiosity regarding how physical environments and cultural data co-exist. Even in this earlier poem, then, an unnatural ecopoetic reading appropriately identifies the poet's fascination with preserving both natural and cultural

elements of experience through the textual space.

Although not typically given much attention in scholarship on the poem, even that criticism that specifically considers landscape in “Thorow,” it is clear that Howe’s relationship with nature is one of interconnection and embeddedness. The poem further complicates this relationship when it adds language into considerations of nature.

We go through the word Forest

Trance of an encampment  
not a foot of land cleared

The literature of savagism  
under a spell of savagism

Nature isolates the Adirondacks

In the machinery of injustice  
my whole being is Vision (Howe, Singularities 49)

While the speaker’s set-up for the poem discussed in the previous paragraph remarks on the occupation of the perceiver by the place, this later section of the poem ties language to the complex experiences of landscape. The passage begins by explicitly conflating landscape and language, explaining that the poem brings the reader not “through” the “forest” itself, but through “the word Forest.” In this passage, the speaker identifies the fixing power of the word, or as her earlier quotation from Deleuze and Guattari reveals, “[t]he proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity” (qtd. in Howe, Singularities 41). In this sense, the commentary on the ability of a word to fix the complexity and “multiplicity” of experience into something stable and fixed builds throughout the poem, becoming most pronounced in the above passage. As the speaker reveals that we enter “the word” rather than the real “forest,” she then notes that in this

word we enter a “trance” in which we see the land as pristine (“not a foot of land cleared”). The word “forest” is imbued with particularly pastoral undertones, which shape the way one experiences the word. For the speaker, those undertones take on a central role as she acknowledges the “trance” or “spell” that words bring with them (“The literature of savagism / under a spell of savagism”) and that these words have the power to isolate one aspect of the physical world from the sometimes dark cultural, historical, and personal histories that lie within them (“Nature isolates the Adirondacks”).

In a sense, then, this passage examines the distortive qualities of language that might best be understood in terms Timothy Morton establishes regarding the concept of nature when he explains that “nature always slips out of reach in the very act of grasping it. At the very moment at which writing seems to be dissolving in the face of the compelling reality it is describing, writing overwhelms what it is depicting and makes it impossible to find anything behind its opaque texture” (19). Morton contends that the word or idea of “nature” brings with it limitations so that naming something, as the speaker names the “forest,” hides the complexity behind it. According to White, “Thorow” is an “interruption” of “the literary projects of savagism and the pastoral,” an observation that aptly accounts for the speaker’s reaction against the pastoral image of the uncleared forest (253). In Morton’s terms, the speaker reacts against the pastoral by identifying the “trance” and “spell” that “isolates the Adirondacks” from their history and individual experiences of them. The commentary on language and nature in “Thorow” provides an important foundation for Howe’s use of landscape throughout her poetics. Although here the landscape appears to be an overt participant in the text, it is a troubled conception of place that makes its way into Howe’s poetry. Rather than accepting

language and landscape together, the poet identifies the ways in which they complicate and even impede one another. As she states in her interview with Keller, “pure feeling is connected to silence. Any mark or word would be a corruption of that infinite purpose or purposelessness” (7). The recognition of the enmeshment but also contradictions inherent in language and environment shapes Howe’s unnatural eco-poetics. In “Thorow” as in The Midnight, environment plays a significant role as the speaker struggles to contend with these limitations and locate a textual space that can adequately account for the multiplicity of physical environments in the limited forum of language.

### **Unnatural Eco-poetics in The Midnight**

The role of environments in The Midnight is arguably less obvious than in some of Howe’s other work. In fact, the book appears to be only minimally connected with concepts of space as it leaves the reader thoroughly disoriented by its leaps between poetry and prose as well as shifts in content that range from inquiries into language to historical commentary. Traditional understandings of landscape or environment are not applicable to The Midnight because material space is so deeply entwined with nonmaterial elements that shape it throughout the book; however, if we broaden our conception of environment, the seemingly unnatural elements of Howe’s poetry can be read for their environmental underpinnings. Through the lens of unnatural eco-poetics, the poem’s disjointedness coupled with its fascination with history, culture, memory, and language, can be viewed as attempts by the poet to adapt the multiple subjective elements that compose an individual’s experience, including all of its diversions and inattentions, to text. For Howe, the page is a site or a space where the many elements of experience

that are typically overlooked or underprivileged can be brought to the fore.

The poet's recognition of the multiple influences on perceptions of environment becomes apparent through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, which specifically examines the naturalcultural elements of texts. An unnatural ecopoetic reading reveals that rather than excluding the individual perceiver from his or her context, Howe considers the ways in which environmental experiences are shaped by physical landscape, history, culture, and a variety of other factors. Throughout the book, some of these elements are emphasized more than others, but the speaker explicitly comments on her purpose in one of two prose sections, "Scare Quotes I," on her mother's move from Dublin to Boston. Here, the speaker reveals the power that text holds, ultimately demonstrating that "there were always three dimensions, visual, textual, and auditory. Waves of sound connected us by associational syllabic magic to an original but imaginary place existing somewhere across the ocean between the emphasis of sound and the emphasis of sense" (Howe, The Midnight 75). The speaker accepts the multiple "dimensions" that compose experience by pointing toward the "visual, textual, and auditory" and emphasizing the sensory aspect of it. Of similar importance, though, is her establishment of place—seemingly textual space—that is "imaginary" but also "existing somewhere" that is not entirely tangible. It is a space between "sound" and "sense," where neither one takes priority. Arguably, this is an outline for Howe's poetics. Her book similarly inhabits a middle space between pure form ("sound") and comprehension or logic ("sense"), always slipping back and forth between the two, just as it slips between poetry and prose, but never fully settling on either side.

It is the poet's acknowledgment of middle spaces that leads to the unlikely



environments of her poems, in which naturecultures are pulled to the fore. Although space appears a foreign concept to Howe, she conceptualizes her work in environmental terms, acknowledging that the naturalcultural fusion she recognizes through the “three dimensions” of experience are inherently spatial or environmental. In “Scare Quotes II,” she writes that “[e]nvironment itself is its own vast force. Peace, war, nuclear power, human population, immigration, famine, animal, fish, forest—lights go on and out in houses” (Howe, The Midnight 141). Recognizing that “environment” is composed not only of natural elements (“animal, fish, forest”) but also of cultural (“immigration, famine”), political (“Peace, war, nuclear power”), and social (“human population”) elements, the speaker explicitly establishes a unique conception of environment that warrants the naturalcultural approach of an unnatural ecopoetic reading. Approaching the book as a manifestation of the speaker’s environmental sentiments reveals that Howe’s poetics is not simply fragmented or disjointed, but interested in expressing “the uncertain truth of fiction” (Howe, The Midnight 65). The book remains “uncertain” because it acknowledges multiplicity and subjectivity in perception and thus writing, which can allow for a “truth” but always only an “uncertain” one. In essence, then, Howe’s poetics demonstrates that all texts strive for “truth” but achieve only an “uncertain truth.”

The speaker’s acceptance of uncertainty and multiplicity is reflected in her formal choices. In The Dance of the Intellect (1985), Marjorie Perloff observes that “the articulation of an individual language is all but prevented by the official discourses that bombard the consciousness from all sides” (231). Like Hejinian, for Howe, history and culture, or “official discourses,” are always influencing the way experience is articulated. However, rather than attempting to overcome the reality that material experiences are

mediated, as Hejinian does, Howe chooses to acknowledge and embrace and even highlight it. As such, The Midnight begins with a printing of a copy of a tissue paper interleaf from Robert Louis Stevenson's The Master of Ballantrae. Howe explains in the preface, "bookbinders placed [these sheets]. . . between frontispiece and title page in order to prevent illustration and text from rubbing together" (Howe, The Midnight, n.p.). Immediately, the poet's commentary here harkens back to her own poetic form and ultimately her origins in visual arts, revealing that she is always aware of how words and reality mingle in her work. The opening image reveals words behind a thick film, making it almost impossible to decipher the individual letters and often making the words illegible. Opening the book with this image and its accompanying commentary, the poet immediately foregrounds the inescapability of her book's historical predecessors on the project at hand. The placement of this murky image at the beginning implies that there is always such a historical and cultural film influencing and even obscuring a writer's new work. Perhaps even more importantly, she demonstrates that her work engages in much the same task as the tissue interleaf. Perloff similarly argues that the tissue interleaf represents the central task of the book as it illustrates "the contradiction between image and verbal caption, the transparency of tissue paper as analogue for the 'bed hangings' and curtains to come" (Unoriginal Genius 107). Although destined to keep "illustration and text from rubbing together," both the interleaf and The Midnight reveal that the two are always intertwined. As the interleaf's murky image reveals, the text not only takes on but becomes an image.

Howe's acknowledgment of how multiple elements intermingle is an important facet of her poetry and one that facilitates her unnatural ecopoetics. Rather than

attempting to forget and separate history, culture, and other influences in order to “accurately” or objectively express nature, the poet recognizes the role that history and culture play in experience and that the two are always rubbing together despite efforts to prevent it. By revealing from the beginning that her work is influenced by “official discourses” and accepting these as one of many influences on her experiences, Howe can more readily acknowledge how her own culture and personal history shape the poem, such as her mother and her Irish heritage, without abandoning her central interest in the gaps that occur when the real world is translated to language. To more fully explore The Midnight through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, I will consider three facets of the book that contribute to a naturalcultural rendering of experience—first, the influence of history and the problems with historical records; second, the power of personal emotions, memories, cultural influences, and the boundaries of one’s perception; and third, explorations of both the promise and limitations of language and form. By breaking the complex and often overlapping moves in the book down into three distinct categories and then considering where those categories connect, we can begin to read The Midnight as a cohesive text and understand it as more than a purposely disjointed avant-garde poem but one that foregrounds through language and form the many influences, limitations, and oversights that shape real-world experiences.

Howe’s naturalcultural conception of space is tied up in the central motifs of the poem, one of the most prominent of which is history. Throughout her career, the poet has been examined by critics who claim that her central purpose is to investigate the underserved figures in history. In Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe (1992), Peter Quartermain observes that “Howe is, more than

any American writer I can think of except perhaps Melville or Henry Adams, burdened by history: The burden, of retrieving from erasure and marginality those (women) who have been written out, without (as Howe puts it in her prose introduction to ‘Thorow’) appropriating primal indeterminacy, is compounded by the drift of the primal toward the immediate, toward the abolition of history (and hence of language) altogether” (194). Since much of Howe’s writing does, as Quartermain contends, retrieve “from erasure and marginality” figures who have been otherwise ignored, history has been acknowledged by many critics as a driving force for Howe’s poetics.

However, an unnatural ecopoetic approach reveals that the historical presences in her work shape the textual space of the poem. In “Bed Hangings I,” the speaker considers the place and stability of history and its connection to language as she acknowledges the influence of writing on historical record. The poem reads:

It is requested that those who  
discover errors in this work  
not mentioned in the ERRATA  
should give information of them  
to Mr. William L. Kingsley of  
New Haven and if it seems  
desirable they will be given to  
the public together with other  
facts and statistics ADDENDA  
The great Disposer of events  
is exchanging what was good  
for what is better history that  
is written will be accomplished (Howe, The Midnight 38)

In this poem, the speaker emphasizes the lack of stability in historical records and documents their relationship to writing. Referencing William L. Kingsley, the long-time proprietor of the New Englander and Yale Review in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the poem seems to comment on “errata” that might appear in writing. In the text, the speaker

recounts how a reader might report an error and concludes that “if it seems / desirable” those errors will be corrected and “addenda” distributed “to / the public.” In the process of correcting these errors, the editor or as the speaker names him, “[t]he great Disposer of events,” decides whether the corrected material “is better history.” In this, the speaker implies a sense of subjectivity in what becomes documented history as she reveals that the editor’s discretion shapes it (“exchanging what was good / for what is better”). As such, the poem comments on the instability of history and its subjective documentation.

My approach highlights that writing makes the nonmaterial and material elements of experience tangible and active. Howe’s speaker concludes with a bid toward writing; after acknowledging the instability of history, she reveals that “history that / is written will be accomplished.” Here, the speaker claims that once “history” gets “written down,” as in Kingsley’s journal, it becomes tangible. Put another way, writing constitutes history. Following the previous line’s commentary on the unfixed nature of history, these final lines implicate language in the construction of worlds, implying that writing has real-world effects. In his discussion of “pure poetry” and history, Naylor contends that Howe’s writing is “temporal,” “historical,” and “linguistic, rather than naturalistic. In this sense, she participates in the tradition of pure poetry that seeks to create a world of words. . . . Yet the crucial difference between Howe and other pure poets . . . is that she does not attempt to seal this world off from the real world of historical fact but to make visible the holes in traditional historiography” (53). Unnatural ecopoetics reveals that the lack of stability in history is tied to the subjectivity in its selection and recording, a reality that pulls the writer into the creation of both text and world while also recognizing that even seemingly stable elements like history or, to push further, physical experiences are

encountered subjectively.

The subjectivity of the writer is mirrored in the poem by the subjectivity of the reader's encounter with the text. Still, here it is not Howe's reader's experience that demonstrates the subjective nature of experience, but the roles of historical and personal references that are infused into the text. In a discussion of her great aunt, Louie Bennett, the poet notes that her aunt wrote in her copy of The Irish Song Book with Original Irish Airs, "This book has a value for Louie Bennett that it cannot have for any other human being. Therefore let no other human being keep it in his possession" (Howe, The Midnight 59). The words are typed out below a photograph of the page itself, on which Bennett's words are visible. For her aunt, the book's power comes from her individual reading of it or, alternatively, her encounter with the physical book as an object to be experienced subjectively rather than something fixed and objective. As such, the speaker questions whether blindly obeying non-disturbance is the best way to preserve history. She goes on to ask:

How can the same volume contain so many different incompatible intrinsic relations? The Bennetts and Mannings are Irish and not Irish so we haven't the secret of our first ancestral parents. Names are only a map we use for navigating. Disobeying Aunt Louie's predatory withdrawal, or preservative denial, I recently secured the spine of her Irish Song Book with duct tape. Damage control—its cover was broken. So your edict flashes daggers—so what. (Howe, The Midnight 59)

In this section, the text oscillates between prose commentary and photography, fusing multiple forms while simultaneously explaining how and why one must embrace new forms to express and preserve history. In Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century (2010), Marjorie Perloff argues that "[h]ere—and this is characteristic of Howe's writing—what begins as a matter-of-fact description of an object, in this case

a book, quickly turns oblique” (102). First acknowledging that “the same volume” can be read differently and even incompatibly, the speaker admits her willingness to disobey her aunt’s “predatory withdrawal” that asks others to leave her copy of the book untouched and instead does “[d]amage control” by taping the book’s broken spine. The instability that she identifies in the book, like the instability of historical record identified in the poem on Kingsley, is tied to language as she reveals that “[n]ames are only a map we use for navigating.” As in the previous passage, language becomes unfixed and flexible to the moment. Naylor’s understanding of history’s role in the book contextualizes this moment; he contends that “the events in history are not, despite appearances, woven into a seamless, hypotactic narrative; information has been, intentionally and unintentionally, left out. Without that information, without the normal hypotactic connections between elements within the narrative, we become, as Howe puts it in another poem, ‘Lost in language,’ although ‘we are language’” (Naylor 61). Ultimately, the speaker’s willingness to challenge the historical record of her aunt and risk altering the record in the process is grounded in the previous section’s questioning of the stability of history. As she acknowledges the subjectivity and instability of historical record, she begins to challenge the traditional methods of preserving history, a challenge that shapes her poetic form.

The speaker’s recognition that the historical record requires new forms of expression to remain relevant to the present moment is the sentiment that gears the book toward an unnatural eco-poetic reading. As she recognizes that history plays a role in how individuals experience texts and worlds while also realizing the flexibility or subjectivity in historical record, the speaker experiments with new forms that emerge from her own

experience of history. In “Scare Quotes I,” she writes that

The relational space is the thing that’s alive with something from somewhere else. Jonathan Edwards was a paper saver. He kept old bills and shopping lists, then copied out his sermons on the verso sides and stitched them into handmade notebooks. When he was in his twenties, Emerson cut his dead minister father’s sermons in manuscript out of their bindings, then used the bindings to hold his own writing. He mutilated another of Emerson senior’s notebooks in order to use the blank pages. Stubs of torn off paper show sound bites. (Howe, The Midnight 58)

The naturalcultural foundations of the text are clearly expressed in this passage as the speaker explicitly comments on the power of fusion. Emerging from her interrogation of history, the speaker contends that “space” becomes “alive” when it is fused “with something from somewhere else.” Here, she grounds this fusion in history as she recounts the cutting, splicing, and fusion in the work of Edwards and Emerson. Both writers destruct original texts and rearrange or rework them for new purposes, presenting a type of recycling that is reminiscent of Howe’s own formal structure. The influence of history is mingled with personal influences and family history later in the book when the speaker states, “[o]ften you must turn Uncle John’s books around and upside down to read the clippings and other insertions pasted and carefully folded inside” (Howe, The Midnight 143). Harkening back to the poet’s own formal experimentation, this passage’s connection to her “Uncle John” reveals a familial connection. On the one hand, these passages demonstrate that her form is rooted in historical methods and family history. On the other hand, her foregrounding of the forces that shape her text allows the reader to identify those influences and better understand how, when, and where those forces are at work in the book.

Foregrounding the book’s textuality and influences is a central concern in



unnatural ecopoetics and, as the prose and poetry sections reveal, to the poet. In an earlier poetry section, she similarly comments on how the fusion of history, text, language, and here economics create a textual space in which all of these influences are at the fore but despite their disclosure, a viable space still emerges. The poem reads:

Surviving fragment of  
New England original  
bed hanging handsome  
cambleteen red curtain  
(1746) “a sort of fine  
worsted cambels” Camlet  
Imitation camlet scrap  
To describe Camlet I will  
Look into Chambers and  
Postlethwayt (Howe, The Midnight 15)

The poem begins by harkening back to the “bed hanging” that inspires the section’s title.

The “[s]urviving fragment,” the speaker reveals was crafted in 1746 out of “Camlet / Imitation camlet scrap.” The speaker’s focus on the material of the curtain is related to the interest in fusion that becomes apparent later in the text. In this poem, the camlet, a type of fabric woven out of camel hair or angora wool, is seen as “imitation,” a copy of the authentic material. Since the poem considers the bed hanging that dominates this section of the book, the recognition of it as “imitation” is particularly important.

Recognizing that the material is only a copy calls into question the authenticity of the section titled “Bed Hangings I.” As the curtain is composed of copied material, so too is the section, which, like the fabric, weaves together copied material from history, culture, memory, and language. As such, the poem concludes by overtly acknowledging the naturalcultural fusions it embraces by turning toward something contemporaneous to the bed hanging but otherwise unrelated from the scene—economics—to describe the

physical material of the curtains. As the speaker reveals that she turns to “Chambers and Postlethwayt” to “describe” the “Camlet,” she employs economics and history into her understanding of the physical object and its historical role. Postlethwayt was “one of the leading economists before Adam Smith. . . . His writings helped American revolutionaries justify attacks on Britain’s ‘unfair taxes’, and laid foundations for chambers of commerce” (Bennett 187). Since cutting and splicing make “space” become “alive,” the poet turns to economic theory contemporaneous to the bed hanging to describe the physical manifestation of history—the remnants of the curtain—and thus making the present fragments of the object in its current place and its history come to life for the reader. In this way, the poem demonstrates how multiple elements compose a particular experience, pulling the historical, textual, personal, material, and economic into a single space.

While many Howe critics argue that history is at the heart of the poet’s work, a closer examination of the historical presences in the book through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics reveals that history is employed as one of many elements that constitute an experience. The speaker engages with history subjectively, recognizing its instability and that it benefits from new methods of preservation. Historical data is not best preserved by leaving it untouched and pristine, but by considering new methods of expressing it in which historical records are contextualized by the contemporary moment. Indeed, history is important or even vital in Howe’s work, but it is employed alongside other elements of experience that fuse together to form a single naturalcultural environment on the page. The Midnight engages with naturecultures not only by employing history but also by considering the personal connections to that history that shape the writer. Throughout the

book, including some of the sections previously discussed, the poet's family history is fused with historical data, making public history and personal history indecipherable.

Returning, for instance, to the opening copy of the interleaf from The Master of Ballantrae, Howe's references to historical moments are tied to her own personal histories. The opening copy of the tissue paper interleaf, which demonstrates a clear interest in visual arts, poetic form, collage, and historical record, is actually linked to a specific part of the poet's personal life. In "Scare Quotes I," she reveals that "[s]everal years ago [she] inherited John Manning's heavily marked up copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale" (Howe, The Midnight 53). As the speaker reveals that the poet's history is tied up in the formal and historical elements of the text, the influence of her own personal history on the poem becomes apparent. Perloff observes, "The Midnight points both outside the text to the countless memoirs, biographies, and gossip about this or that Irish writer, actor, or relative who had anything to do with the poet's maternal background, and inside its covers to the diverse and contradictory clues that are woven together to create the book's 'factual telepathy'" (Unoriginal Genius 106). In this way, the copied interleaf conveys a similar message to the Louie Bennett passage previously discussed as it demonstrates that everything is imbued with personal and family history, influences that shape and even create meaning. For the speaker, the "value" in Louie Bennett's book lay in her material copy, just as the inclusion of the interleaf from Stevenson's book is only explained by its personal significance. The poet chose to include not only a historical piece but one with profound personal ties. In this way, her engagement with public and personal history is tied together because each shapes the other.

The poet's personal connections to the historical data referenced in the text shapes her formal choices. While her radical experimentation might appear to be a bid toward language poetry, as other scholars have contended, a close reading of The Midnight reveals that her form is more readily linked to her understanding of how these various ways of experiencing the world—historically, culturally, personally, and materially—are fused. Later in “Scare Quotes I,” the speaker comments on these connections when she reflects on the lives of the books that enter the text:

My mother's close relations treated their books as transitional objects (judging by a few survivors remaining in my possession) to be held, loved, carried around, meddled with, abandoned, sometimes mutilated. They contain dedications, private messages, marginal annotations, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings—scissor work. Some volumes have been shared as scripts for family theatricals. When something in the world is cross-identified, it just is. They have made this relation by gathering—airs, reveries, threads, mythologies, nets, oilskins, briars and branches, wishes and needs, in tact—into a sort of tent. This is a space children used to play in. (Howe, The Midnight 60)

In a moment of meta-poetic commentary, the speaker clearly connects the personal history of the texts with their role within the book. Commenting that her family members viewed their books as things “to be held, loved, carried around, meddled with, abandoned, sometimes mutilated,” and included within them extra-textual data (“dedications, private messages, marginal annotations, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings—scissor work”), the speaker emphasizes the materiality of the books as objects. Her family members integrated the books into their lives, carrying them with them, infusing them with their daily experiences, and ultimately recreating them through contextual and material alterations. As a result, the books that the speaker references throughout The Midnight are not simply copies of the original texts, but objects infused

with a great deal of personal history that alters the overall meaning of Howe's book. For Howe, in the case of *Ballantrae*, for instance, it is not the book's content that is significant, but its expression of the life that it lived in her family. The inclusion of the book, then, infuses public history into the text while also bringing with it a wealth of personal connections and memories for the poet. Writing that "[w]hen something in the world is cross-identified, it just is," the speaker articulates a naturalcultural sentiment, in which the textual space of the book is infused with physical movement ("carried around"), external influences ("private messages," "press cuttings"), and individual emotions ("loved," "abandoned"). Howe's unnatural ecopoetics emerges, then, through her fusion of these various spaces into the text.

In this passage, the books that the poet references are clearly revealed as both naturalcultural and spatial, illuminating the methodology behind her ecopoetics and exemplifying her conception of space. Back contends that "[p]lace is, for Howe, a site of specific voices that need to be listened to—voices of literal territories (that is, New York State's Lake George, Dublin's the Liberties) that she traverses, inhabits, examines, and that at all times infiltrate and influence the form and content of her work. Place is also a reflection of the work's integrity, as expressed in her poetry's exclusive preoccupation with landscapes to which she feels she in some way belongs, is connected to, and created by: poetry is, for Howe, an act of self-involvement and self-revelation" (8). Pushing Back's argument even further, place in Howe's work is composed of multiple elements, and often multiple genres and forms, that express the poet's "self-involvement and self-revelation." In the passage, the speaker states that the books gain significance by being "cross-identified," a connection that results from their accumulation of "airs, reveries,

threads, mythologies, nets, oilskins, briars and branches, wishes and needs.” Here, the nonmaterial or subjective elements of experience and the material aspects of space that shape the books are fused together “into a sort of tent” or single structure. The physical (“nets,” “briars and branches”), the historical (“mythologies”), and the personal (“airs, reveries,” “wishes and needs”) are combined into a single structure, a fusion that facilitates being (“it just is”). Now “cross-identified,” the books come into being and become textual spaces tangible enough for children to play in. The poet’s connection between the various elements of the text and physical space in this passage create what she calls “a document universe,” or a world composed of words and the various elements that constitute them (Howe, The Midnight 61).

The way Howe explains textual space in this passage is powerfully supported by the formal elements of the book—namely her inclusion of various elements from family, textual, and public history. Aside from discussions and descriptions of these elements, the poet includes photographs of various objects, ranging from portraits and paintings to book pages and postage stamps. The inclusion of these objects is puzzling largely for their highly unconventional placement within the poetic context but also because many of them depict objects or scenes that are already described in the text. In Visual Culture, Margarita Dikovitskaya observes that “[a]rt plays the role of literature despite a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, visual imaging and picturing and, on the other, linguistic expression: Language is based on a system (syntax, grammar, phonology) that can be scientifically described whereas pictures cannot” (56). By including both the image and the textual discussion of its content, the poet creates calls into question the ability of the word to depict the world through what Dikovitskaya

describes as language's system. Perloff argues that "the found text and illustration measure the absurdity of Howe's situation more fully than could any direct narrative account" (Unoriginal Genius 121). In other words, Perloff contends that the fusion of various elements throughout the book, including the visual, express a truer account of the lived moment than words alone can. The inclusion of images throughout the text, then, serves as a reminder of the limitations of language.

Language's limitations take prominence throughout The Midnight. Although these moments are often overlooked in favor of historical and family histories, Howe demonstrates a profound interest in the ability and failure of language to express real-world experience. With this interest, the poet foregrounds language's limitations both through the poem's content and the inclusion of photographs that are less limited by language's system or rules. The contrast that the photographs raise between the clear expression of visual arts and the restrictions of language is articulated by the speaker immediately after her discussion of her family's relationship with books. She writes, "Words sounding as seen the same moment on paper will always serve as the closest I can come to cross-identification vis-à-vis counterparts in a document universe" (Howe, The Midnight 61). After this, the text breaks for a line that includes all the letters of the alphabet. In this moment, the speaker states that "the closest" she can come to "cross-identification" or being, is based on words "sounding as seen the same moment," which implies a disjunction between the visual and the written. In a similar comment made during an interview with Keller, the poet comments on the connection between the lived or seen experience and the written version of it when she states, "[y]ou're hearing something you see. And there's the mystery of the eye-hand connection: when it's your

work, it's your hand writing. Your hand is receiving orders from somewhere. Yes, it could be your brain, your superego giving orders; on the other hand, they are orders” (emphasis in original; Keller 33). Here, Howe reveals that she views writing as mediated by other forces, whether it be the brain or otherwise. In this sense, the physical experience or sensation is never the same when translated to language. For the poet, language is limited to the alphabet, a system that constrains its ability to express the world. However, by foregrounding language's limitations as she does in The Midnight, the poet attempts to express a naturalcultural experience by supplementing her text with visual images. Providing multiple perspectives, visual and written, on the same object, person, or scene, the poem achieves a sort of multi-angle telling that acknowledges and accepts the limitations of language.

The unnatural ecopoetics of The Midnight hinges upon the poet's attempt to acknowledge and navigate the gap between world and word and this quest is powerfully expressed throughout the book through an investigation into language's limitations. In the preface, the speaker comments, “[a]lthough a sign is understood to be consubstantial with the thing or being it represents, word and picture are essentially rivals” (Howe, The Midnight, n.p.). In many ways, these lines outline Howe's project. Considering how to best make use of language and form to express a naturalcultural experience, she explores what language can and cannot accomplish. In “Scare Quotes I,” Howe writes,

[i]f at the heart of language lies what language can't express, can it be false to say that the golden mountain which exists exists? O light and dark vowels with your transconsistent hissing and hushing I know you curtain I sense delusion. Fortunately we can capture for our world some soft object, a fuzzy conditional, a cot cover, an ode, a couplet, a line, a lucky stone—to carry around when camping. (The Midnight 70)



In this passage, the speaker contends that “the heart of language” is inexpressible, implying that the impetus for writing is more than language itself but something beyond it. As Quartermain observes, “[w]hile the text longs for resolution, it insistently demands that its disorder not be dissipated in mere definition” (192). In other words, the inexpressibility or lack of clear definitions is central to the text’s purpose. Since Howe’s passage goes on to comment on the limitations of language, it is clear that the inexpressible “heart of language” is an experience that is comprehensible in the physical world but not translatable to words. Pointing toward the rules that limit language (“vowels”), she reveals that even in its vagueness (“light and dark vowels with your transconsistent hissing and hushing”) language attempts to express the lived experience, deluding the reader into believing it does so accurately (“I know you curtain I sense delusion”). Foregrounding the limitations of language, she observes that despite its inaccuracy to the physical world, language holds the power to express some version of it (“a fuzzy conditional”). In other words, the speaker acknowledges that while “language can’t express” the “golden mountain,” it can capture details or moments in that lived experience. It is, then, in an “object” or a “fuzzy” representation of the world that language operates for Howe. Still, despite its accuracy, the power of language is the portability (“to carry around when camping”) of ideas that it facilitates. Only through language can ideas move from place to place and person to person. In this sense, language, while flawed and limited, is the only available tool to transport complex ideas, especially “fuzzy” but artistic messages (“an ode, a couplet, a line”) from one person to another.

Although Howe’s foregrounding of the limitations of language is most articulate

in the prose sections of the book, when one reads with this thread in mind it becomes clear that these moments are also evident in the poetry sections of the book. An early poem reads:

Go too—my savage pattern  
 on surface material the line  
 in ink if you have curtains  
 and a New English Dictionary  
 there is nothing to justify a  
 claim for linen except a late  
 quotation knap warp is flax  
 Fathom we without cannot (Howe, The Midnight 8)

In this piece, the speaker identifies her poem as a “savage pattern” that appears in “the line.” Recognizing the constructedness of her own writing, then, as reliant on “a New English Dictionary,” paper or “linen,” and a stolen “quotation,” Howe foregrounds the problems that exist with traditional poetry. To break away from such “savage pattern[s],” she alters the language itself. As the speaker recognizes these issues, the language breaks down into a jumbled version of the original (“Fathom we without cannot”), making it difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to decipher the literal meaning of the line. The speaker’s breakdown of language in this poem reflects the limited reach of language in expressing the lived experience behind it. Quartermain emphasizes the poet’s commentary on language as pushing against the content of the text when he contends that “Howe’s writing arises from a series of tensions, between the more-or-less explicit themes and subject matter of the work, and the unstated verbal and schematic activity of the poem” (183). The “explicit themes” of her work, apparent both in the poem and the prose passage previously discussed, although seemingly focused on history and personal connections, are fundamentally tied to language.

In many ways, Howe's commentary on language is mimicked by her formal choices throughout the book. Oscillating between poetry and prose while integrating personal reflections, photographs, and historical data into the text, the book represents a truly unique poetic form in which the poet attempts to preserve the disjunction of lived experience on the page. As such, Howe's critique of language is coupled with a distinct concern for how the complexity and simultaneity of experience is deflated in text, both linguistically and formally. One of the book's early poems reads:

Counterforce brings me wild hope  
 non-connection is itself distinct  
 connection numerous surviving  
 fair trees wrought with a needle  
 the merest decorative suggestion  
 in what appears to be sheer white  
 muslin a tree fair hunted Daphne  
 Thinking is willing you are wild  
 to the weave not to material itself (Howe, The Midnight 17)

Out of context, this poem has little significance. In fact, its lack of punctuation and seemingly nonsensical utterances make it initially incomprehensible. Considering the poet's interest in language, however, this poem connects important conversations about language that occur explicitly in the prose sections with the significantly more dense poetry sections. As the speaker states here, disjointedness does not necessarily bring incomprehensibility or uselessness; rather, acknowledging and preserving the complexity and variety of lived experience creates a truer representation of reality than one that attempts to fill those gaps. The speaker states that "non-connection is itself distinct / connection," highlighting the importance of acknowledging such gaps. It is, in fact, when connection is imposed upon the lived experience that problems arise. Claiming that "trees wrought with a needle," or tied together neatly but unnaturally by the human observer,

are altered by “the merest decorative suggestion” in their otherwise pure existence (“sheer white / muslin”), the speaker reveals that to force connection actually creates disconnection. As such, she concludes by claiming that “Thinking” demands that one allow lived experience to maintain its non-connection or disjointedness (“wild / to the weave”) even as one acknowledges and values such lived experience (“not to material itself”).

For Howe, history, personal remembrances, language, physical experience, and form are tied up in the text. Both through the poetry and prose sections of the book, she foregrounds the limitations of language while simultaneously working to create a textual space that can accommodate the various naturalcultural elements of experience. In essence, the book acts much like the interleaf of The Master of Ballantrae. As the speaker reveals, “[t]his thinnest blank sheet should be mute but it’s noisily nondescript. The interleaf shelters the frontispiece though it’s flimsy and somewhat slippery” (Howe, The Midnight 57). The interleaf “shelters” the book itself, the actual object, but it is “noisily nondescript” because it is “flimsy” and “slippery.” In this way, the interleaf acts much as language does, appearing as a murky but untrue expression of the frontispiece but never actually standing in for the original. For Howe, this is the position of language. It acts as a murky expression of lived experience, always trying to stand in for the real-world original but remaining a blurred, unclear copy. Yet the poet reveals that just as we acknowledge the interleaf as not standing in for the original frontispiece, we must recognize that words cannot stand in for lived experience. Considering her poetry through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, it is clear that Howe’s work reveals that we must accept that lived experience can never fully be expressed on the page but only approached

through text and form. In this way, the book is profoundly engaged with unnatural ecopoetics. Examining the limitations of language and the possibilities of form, The Midnight is well-suited to an unnatural ecopoetic reading as it considers how to express the simultaneity and multiplicity of experience while acknowledging and accepting the limitations of its own medium.

### **Conclusion**

To discuss Howe from the perspective of ecopoetics initially seems unfounded by the poet's work. With traditional images of nature highly disembodied by formal and linguistic play and considering the highly disorienting form of her text, Howe's work seems to run counter to most conceptions of environment. However, Howe is uniquely engaged with the variety, multiplicity, and simultaneity of lived experience, recognizing that no one element shapes it alone but that experience is tied to many subjective elements at once. The textual space of the book is made up of these various facets, coming together to create a naturalcultural space. Returning to one of the most profound moments in the book, the speaker writes that The Midnight is "assembling materials for a recurrent return somewhere. Familiar sound textures, deliverances, vagabond quotations, preservations, wilderness shrubs, little resuscitated patterns. Historical or miraculous. Thousands of correlations have to be sliced and spliced" (85). It is this variety of components that makes Howe's textual space more authentic to lived experience because the poet acknowledges the text's constructedness and foregrounds the variety of material and nonmaterial elements that shape it. She recognizes that her pages are not the same as lived experience but uses novel forms and a variety of elements to attempt to express on

the page the variety of influences that shape experience. To do so, Howe employs radical experimentation, collage, visual arts, and linguistic play in an effort to not only acknowledge but foreground its own limitations and explore the possibilities of such openness.

Despite the lack of traditional environments in Howe's work, her engagement with naturalcultural spaces and her infusion of them into her texts exemplifies the unnatural ecopoetic sentiments in The Midnight. For Howe, the foreground textual spaces that she creates must account for the many histories, personal memories, emotional entanglements, formal nuances, and physical realities of lived experience while also acknowledging that text can never equal the world. However, in The Midnight does not need to equal the lived experience to be effective. It accepts, as its speaker states, that the "[e]nvironment itself is its own vast force" composed of a variety of naturalcultural elements and the text, too, is a force (141). A textual space has the power to create what Howe terms "counterparts in a document universe," which reveal the many influences that shape material experience (The Midnight 61). Indeed, the book's power emerges because "the story inside its covers has another conscious life" (Howe, The Midnight 61). By granting Howe's text autonomy, readers discover that the textual space of The Midnight is more than just a failed copy or mimic of the lived world but a world in itself.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ECOPOETICS OF FOUND TEXT AND TEXTUAL SPACE IN KENNETH GOLDSMITH'S SEVEN AMERICAN DEATHS AND DISASTERS

Kenneth Goldsmith's Seven American Deaths and Disasters (2013) is a found conceptual poem that transcribes radio and television reports of a number of recent national deaths and disasters. The book is “fascinated with rendering the mundane in language” (Goldsmith, SADAD 169). In found poems like Goldsmith's language is extracted directly from human representations of the lived experience—cultural, digital, natural, and political. As Goldsmith transcribes reports from real-world events, he expresses those moments without further translating them through the poet's own language, but instead takes a variety of cultural artifacts and puts them together on paper in order to illustrate the complex narratives that constructed that moment. The poet does not attempt to overcome the limitations of human perception by expressing a pseudo-authentic experience, but rather foregrounds, to an even greater degree than Susan Howe, the inevitably murky filter through which human beings are destined to view the world. The recent developments in new materialism discussed in this dissertation's introduction, which posit that the human is deeply enmeshed within his or her surroundings and ultimately one with them, reveal that despite the lack of traditional images of “nature” in Seven American Deaths and Disasters and its radical enmeshment in pop culture,

Goldsmith's book is highly eco-poetic as it attempts to convey the material and nonmaterial elements that compose real-world experiences and demonstrates their agential power by demonstrating their shaping influence on experience.

Although in the past Goldsmith would not have been read as an eco-poet, unnatural eco-poetics lends itself to analyzing his work. As I move eco-poetic critique beyond traditional ideas of nature and environmental experience toward a more multifaceted approach to the various divergent and sometimes unconnected elements that compose a lived moment, it becomes increasingly tied to the tenets of conceptual writing (and ultimately conceptual art) that investigate not only what is experienced but also how such experience is shaped. A full understanding of the connections between eco-poetics and conceptual writing, however, requires some familiarity with the theories and history behind conceptual art and writing. The movement toward conceptual or appropriative art begins with Marcel Duchamp's famous ready-made pieces ranging from the widely known urinal to a typewriter cover unprecedentedly re-contextualized for the art space. Duchamp revolutionized the art world by taking found everyday objects like the urinal and re-deploying them in a new context. In "The Fate of Echo," Craig Dworkin explains that the value in Duchamp's pieces "depended not on any intrinsic qualities but rather on the assertion—implicit in the context of their gallery display—that they were to be considered as art" (xxv). The shift that Dworkin identifies in Duchamp's work reveals that the conceptual art movement propels the art world toward a breakdown between the boundaries of art and life. Art is no longer an object removed from everyday life, but something extracted from it. Dworkin explains that this conceptual art works because "[t]he simple act of reframing seemed to refresh one's view of even familiar works,



which appear significantly different by virtue of their new context” (xxiv). Duchamp’s re-contextualization of the urinal forever changed the way individuals interpret the everyday object and understand the concept of art. By pulling the familiar into a new space, the material opens new avenues for inquiry and investigation.

Darren Hudson Hick explains in “Forgery and Appropriation in Art” that after Duchamp, artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein pushed the boundaries of appropriation art even further by drawing from pop culture images but the movement reached its climax when artist Sherrie Levine put on an exhibition composed of photographs of photographs by another artist (1052). As appropriation art develops, then, it moves from the re-contextualization of everyday objects to what ultimately appears to be a kind of forgery as it re-appropriates other works of art. Hick explains that “[a]lthough the term ‘appropriation art’ has been used to refer to the appropriation of ideas, to cultural borrowing, and the collage and assemblage works of Dadaists and pop artists, the term has come to be more closely associated with the work of Levine and others who reproduce pre-existing works outright” (1052). Appropriation art is now viewed primarily as an act of theft or forgery. Unlike Duchamp’s re-contextualization of the everyday object, these later appropriation pieces seek to re-frame art itself, thus drawing attention to its original meaning, goals, and place while also giving it a new purpose.

The development toward this Levine-inspired appropriation art is arguably tied to the unique developments and challenges of new generations. In 1980, when Levine broke new ground, the world was quite different than that of Duchamp—beginning to engage more and more with emerging technologies and facing an increasingly uncertain political

future, the 1980s were radically different from the serene pre-war environment of the 1910s. Furthermore, these developments have continued far beyond Levine's 1980 exhibition. Similarly to the changes between the early twentieth-century and Levine's period, the twenty-first century brings different challenges than those faced by earlier artists yet the theory of appropriation art is still relevant to contemporary theory and continues to develop in unlikely ways. Today, appropriation art has expanded beyond the visual arts world and into poetry. Contemporary poets have taken Levine's ideas to the next level, not only re-contextualizing photographs but also plagiarizing without any frame whatsoever to foreground the appropriation. This new conceptual poetry, or even more specifically, appropriation poetry, pulls the everyday into the poetic space to encourage a new perspective on it.

To some degree, the evolution of appropriation art stems from the growing western investment in technology that permeates everyday life and alters the way we perceive and interact with the world. Today, the lived environmental experience is mediated, shaped, or dictated by virtual data ranging from mapping software, to digital game-space, to advanced visual conferencing, to hyper-portable digital music devices. These technological advancements alter the ways in which individuals experience the world, releasing massive numbers of possible scenarios and allowing each person an entirely subjective encounter with the same place and time. The revolution of experience brought on by the digital age demands new types of art and novel methods of expressing the world. In her book on appropriation writing, Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century (2010), Marjorie Perloff highlights the challenge that the digital age presents for literature when she observes that the contemporary writer is faced

with “an environment of hyperinformation, an environment, moreover, where we are all authors” (xi). Perloff’s statement illustrates two new concerns for the literary world—first, that writing is no longer reserved for the elite few, no longer rare, and no longer locked away from the general population in a complex web of publishing houses and editors. Today, writing is produced at a rapid and constant rate; the age of “hyperinformation” brings with it an age of hyper-text. The second implication of Perloff’s statement is that writing can be altered, developed, changed, and moved at any given moment. Unlike in the past, words are not fixed on a page but available on a screen for the average user to copy, paste, plagiarize, alter, or delete.

Goldsmith, who is generally considered the founder of conceptual poetry, argues that developments in technology, which change the role of the writer and simultaneously make words reproduce exponentially, demand a new approach to writing. Yet, critics of conceptual writing contend that the movement is not a response to the changing reality of contemporary culture but is simply a misguided attempt to debunk poetry. In “Against Conceptualism: Defending the Poetry of Affect,” Calvin Bedient observes that conceptual art emerges as an attempt to challenge the capitalist threads running through the art world and proclaims that “current conceptual writers, though descendants of the conceptual artists, defy only the institution of poetry, which, no doubt fortunately, seldom dirties its hands with big money. . . . Its target is the supposed naïveté of literature that aspires to be original, hence writing that is likely to be affectual” (74). Bedient rightly points out that conceptual writing evolves from conceptual art and that it does not necessarily seek affect. However, Bedient does not acknowledge the ways in which the shift toward conceptual appropriation poetry is, unlike the conceptual art of Duchamp,

Warhol, and Levine discussed earlier, the product of a contemporary world in which technology has made words more prevalent and more formative in everyday life. In Motoko Rich's article, "Literacy Debate: Online, R U Really Reading?," Dr. Rand J. Spiro observes that today's young people "aren't as troubled as some of us older folks are by reading that doesn't go in a line . . . [and] [t]hat's a good thing because the world doesn't go in a line, and the world isn't organized into separate compartments or chapters" (qtd. in par. 13). Spiro's point is that today's youth has adapted to a new type of reading, one that is present in the forms of entertainment like online networking, chatting, and web browsing, with which they engage for hours on end each day. The seemingly wasted time spent on the Internet, though, is time spent encountering language and ultimately, as Spiro points out, reading. The Internet has simply changed what it means to read or write and how individuals read or write. Bedient's article ignores that shift. As the concept of reading and writing evolve alongside technology, so too must poetry change if it is to engage with the concerns of contemporary culture.

Perloff contends that the shift to adapt to a changing cultural environment is most apparent in contemporary appropriation poetry. In praise of conceptual poetry, she contends that this style of writing engages more with larger debates than many earlier forms. She argues that in the twenty-first century, poetics is moving away from language poetry's methods of resistance and

to dialogue—a dialogue with earlier texts or texts in other media, with 'writings through' or ekphrases that permit the poet to participate in a larger, more public discourse. Inventio is giving way to appropriation, elaborate constraint, visual and sound composition, and reliance on intertextuality. Thus we are witnessing a new poetry, more conceptual than directly expressive (Perloff 11)

For Perloff, contemporary poetry is increasingly hinged on the process of “appropriation.” No longer invested in originality or “invention” or even “expression,” some contemporary poets are choosing to create by recycling or simply transplanting the work of others. The movement toward appropriation is evident in the discussion of Susan Howe’s placement of found text and images in chapter three and is evidenced in the work of poets like Walter Benjamin, Charles Bernstein, Charles Reznikoff, Robert Fitterman, Anne Carson, and Vanessa Place.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Directly contradicting Bedient’s harsh critique of conceptual poetry, Reznikoff’s mid-century adaption of court documents into his epic poem *Testimony* (1978) reveals the power of appropriation to convey complex emotions and influence conceptions of a particular place and time. His work opens the door to literary appropriation that becomes more readily available in the more recent technological age. Unlike Reznikoff’s edited court-documents-turned-poetry, Place’s *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (2011), which Dworkin and Goldsmith view as a re-appropriation of Reznikoff’s work, is a non-interventionalist “appropriation of the appellate briefs that Vanessa Place has written for her day job as a lawyer who represents indigent sex offenders” (Dworkin and Goldsmith 489). Leaving the documents unedited, aside from anonymizing them for privacy, Place’s work redeploys Reznikoff’s concept for the copy-and-paste generation of the twenty-first century. The appropriation evidenced by Place’s work appears to be simple copying and entirely unoriginal. Yet, in re-contextualizing the words, the poet constructs a complex commentary on “issues of labor, value, surplus, expenditure, context, recontext: uncompromising realism” (Dworking and Goldsmith 489). What initially appears to be simple plagiarism is able to comment on complex issues in what is for her a more

insightful and authentic manner than a highly formulated, mediated, and diluted formal text. It is in this approach that not only the physical events themselves or the emotional responses to them but also the cultural dialogue that shapes them are foregrounded and revealed to the reader.

The conceptual nature of this poetry does not remove it from the reality of everyday life. In fact, I contend that its appropriation ties this work more closely with the realities of real-world experiences than other poetic modes that claim to present authentic expressions of the lived moments. The appropriated work, rather, foregrounds its limitations within language and begins by accepting and embracing those limitations. Joseph Kosuth's Purloined: A Novel (2000),<sup>xlix</sup> for instance, while composed of appropriated materials, engages with a methodology that is deeply engrained with the artistic, cultural, historical, and political spaces that compose lived moments. The book photocopies pages from a variety of novels, compiling them to form a single novel. Although the words are unoriginal and plagiarized, the book's concept is entirely new and uniquely expressive of the culture from which the appropriated novels appeared while also commenting on the culture in which the book is composed. In Notes on Conceptualisms (2009), Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman write that "[a]llegorical writing (particularly in the form of appropriated conceptual writing) does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly." (20). Although Place and Fitterman view appropriation as a critique, which is perhaps more rooted in some forms of appropriation than it is in others,<sup>1</sup> they helpfully point to the ways in which appropriation mirrors culture. By drawing the language of particular cultural artifacts into a new space, a book

like Kosuth's mirrors that culture, ultimately allowing the reader to view it in a new light and with new expectations. This appropriated work, then, reveals the culture from which it draws by foregrounding the language in which it was originally expressed, ultimately demanding critical examination of the words as words, and often contrasting that language with alternate expressions of the same place, time, or culture.

With the shift toward appropriation, as Kenneth Goldsmith proclaims in Uncreative Writing (2011), it becomes clear that in the twenty-first century, "context is the new content" (emphasis in original; 3). These new poets are responding to the proliferation of not just the Internet, but also the increased investment in all things digital that has occurred throughout the past decade. In "Recycling Recycling or *plus ça change...*," Marilyn Randall contends that "[t]he concept of intertextuality (followed closely by bricolage, appropriation, and recycling) . . . [fulfill] a theoretical need to explain the fact of aesthetic repetition to a generation whose faith in originality was confronted by the (re)discovery of its very impossibility" (par. 2). Randall views cultural recycling as a contemporary iteration of imitation, and she rightly identifies the literary turn toward recycling language through re-appropriation as a response to changes in contemporary culture. Although Randall ultimately takes issue with the concept of cultural recycling, her realization that the popularity of recycling rises from contemporary culture's crisis of originality is not unlike Goldsmith's. He boldly proclaims that "[I]iving when technology is changing the rules of the game in every aspect of our lives, it's time to question and tear down such clichés [as creativity] and lay them out on the floor in front of us, then reconstruct these smoldering embers into something new, something contemporary, something—finally—relevant" (UW 9). Identifying twenty-first century

changes in how humans perceive the world, Goldsmith posits that artists must embrace the unoriginality embedded in that context and work to create or “reconstruct” something that is indeed “relevant” to the current social, historical, technological, and political moment.

### **Kenneth Goldsmith’s (Eco)Poetics**

Goldsmith puts his methodology of unoriginality into action in his own poetry. Beginning with a poetics of recording and copying, in Fidget (2000) he transcribes his own movements for a day, in Soliloquy (2001) the poet records all of the words he says or hears for a week, and Day (2003) is a copied volume of The New York Times into the form of a book. In all of these texts, the poet engages in an uncreative poetics, simply recording and copying without creating original texts. However, his more recent books ranging from the trilogy of The Weather (2005), Traffic (2007), and Sports (2008) to his most recent, Seven American Deaths and Disasters engage to an even more radical degree in the process of appropriation central to new century poetics by pulling texts in their entirety from original sources and placing them in the poetic context.

For Goldsmith, this poetics is a responsible and sustainable practice through which the poet can take words that are already in existence and give them new meaning.

In “Being Boring,” he writes:

In 1969, the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.” I’ve come to embrace Huebler’s ideas, though it might be retooled as, “The world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more.” (Goldsmith par. 3)

His intention not “to add any more” texts to the world but rather to recycle those that are



already in existence is a fundamentally environmental impulse, yet the poet only gets ecocritical attention indirectly in terms of waste studies. Considering the overwhelming amount of language that confronts individuals on a daily basis, in “The Waste-Management Poetics of Kenneth Goldsmith” (2008), Christopher Schmidt argues that “Goldsmith reminds us that few consumers read every word of the newspaper, even in its original format. . . . Instead we skim and read only the bits of interest, ignoring vast amounts of primary and secondary information (page numbers, story jumps, bylines) to avoid wasting time” (26). Considering Goldsmith’s poetics from the perspective of waste studies raises interesting questions about how appropriation functions and why it is useful. However, the poet is not read specifically for his attention to recycling or re-working to reveal new insights. Just as a recycling center turns plastic bottles into everything from re-usable coffee cups, to paint, buildings, car interiors, headphones, and even bridges, Goldsmith’s poetics takes words that are largely ignored in their current form and makes them fresh, useful, and relevant to a new moment. In her article, “Waste Aesthetics: Form as Restitution” (2013), Susan Signe Morrison contends that “waste poets . . . acknowledge the poignancy of materiality and thereby function as a kind of homeopathy or social cure for the alienation and disgust we all too often feel towards our own and others' bodily waste and decay" (473). Put another way, employing cultural waste in poetry, as Goldsmith does, provides insight into cultural attitudes toward waste and perhaps act to alter those perspectives by re-appropriating and indeed re-injecting value into the detritus of human life. Similarly, in her chapter on Goldsmith, Perloff explores the poet’s process of appropriation and observes that through its re-deployment, “[a] device obsolete in one period can be restaged and reframed at a different moment

and in a different context and once again made ‘perceptible’” (Unoriginal 20). The process of recycling or appropriating material allows Goldsmith to make those texts that are seemingly obsolete and irrelevant to the contemporary reader gain new significance as it re-contextualizes them for new challenges, problems, and concerns. In terms of unnatural ecopoetics, Goldsmith’s methodology presents the promise of a fully self-conscious textual space that enacts environmentality by emerging from the physical, cultural, and personal unraveling of particular experiences.

However, the significance of Goldsmith’s appropriation poetics has and continues to undergo debate among poets and literary critics. The poet has gained popularity in contemporary poetry circles, appearing in Perloff’s recent book and releasing his own revolutionary text titled Uncreative Writing, but much of the criticism on his work appears in a 2005 issue of the Canadian journal Open Letter dedicated specifically to Goldsmith and conceptual poetics. In this issue, scholars and poets like Craig Dworkin, Christian Bök, Marjorie Perloff, Joshua Schuster, and Molly Schwartzburg write on Goldsmith’s avant-garde poetics. In these articles, interpretations of Goldsmith’s work vary dramatically. In “Encyclopedic Novelties: On Kenneth Goldsmith’s Tomes,” for instance, Molly Schwartzburg argues that Goldsmith’s books are just, if not more, about his own experience making them as they are about the moments they purport to represent (33). This critic identifies the poet’s own composition process as the take-away from his work while others, like Christian Bök, view his work as a larger commentary on the present state of poetry. In “A Silly Key: Some Notes on Solioquy by Kenneth Goldsmith,” Bök argues that Goldsmith’s employment of everyday speech comments on both past oversights and new directions for poetic discourse. He observes that

“Goldsmith attacks the literary pretense of such common speech, demonstrating that lyric poets who purport to speak in the vernacular do not in fact do so because they do not, halfway through a thought, stutter words or corrupt ideas, neither repeating themselves nor redacting themselves” (Bök 63). In this moment, Bök implies that Goldsmith’s poetry engages with the raw, unmediated, unpolished language of everyday speech, encapsulating the reality of that experience in the poem. Several years later, similar ideas are expressed in Schmidt’s article, which considers the connections between Goldsmith’s work and the increasingly popular waste studies movement by looking at two early books, Fidget and Soliloquy. He argues that Goldsmith engages in a “productive tension between efficiency and waste” in his writing (Schmidt 27). While the concept of waste has gained popularity since the publication of the Open Letter special issue, Schmidt’s identification of wasted language in contemporary culture is remarkably similar to Bök’s uncovering of the oversight of ugly realities of everyday speech.

Since the publication of these articles, though, Goldsmith’s work has shifted somewhat dramatically as he has turned toward transcription. Yet Traffic and The Weather continue to be the texts in Goldsmith’s oeuvre that receive substantial critical attention. In “‘Moving Information’: On Kenneth Goldsmith’s The Weather,” Marjorie Perloff writes of The Weather, that it “is a work of radical defamiliarization. It forces the reader to think about the weather in entirely new ways” (“Moving Information,” 82). For Perloff, Goldsmith’s poetics “exemplifies the powers of ‘mere’ transcription, mere copying, to produce new meanings” (“Moving Information,” 77). Goldsmith is not simply being “uncreative” but, she argues, is forwarding new ideas through this experimental approach. Certainly, the poet’s early books yield this insight into the power

of transcription. Yet, his most recent book, Seven American Deaths and Disasters, a similarly appropriated project yet one inundated with complications of cultural dialogue, multiple sources, and emotional investment, and what is arguably Goldsmith's most progressive book does not incite much critical attention. Transcribing radio and television reports of a number of recent national deaths and disasters in the book, Goldsmith creates a poetic expression of lived experiences by placing side-by-side the various cultural depictions that arose with the events themselves and emphasizing how the broadcasts influence conceptions of the events themselves. In appropriated or found poems like Goldsmith's language is extracted directly from cultural iterations of lived experience in media; unnatural ecopoetics reveals that the poet draws the material and nonmaterial elements from the broadcasts and foregrounds the many elements that shape experience—cultural, digital, natural, and political. As Goldsmith transcribes reports from particular experiences in the world, he expresses those cultural moments in text and reveals the complexity of lived moments. As the poet explains in his "Technical Notes," the transcriptions are sourced differently—some come from a single source and others are compilations of a variety of broadcasts (Goldsmith, SADAD 174-5). In pulling broadcasts into the textual space and sometimes splicing them together, Goldsmith re-contextualizes those moments and re-deploys them for a new purpose.

Still, what makes Goldsmith's book ecopoetic? Entirely uninterested in traditional representations of nature, Seven American Deaths and Disasters is an unlikely example for an ecopoetic reading and seemingly a less direct specimen than Goldsmith's other books—namely The Weather, which has clear environmental undertones for its consideration of how environmental elements are perceived, represented, and responded

to in everyday life. Yet, Seven American Deaths and Disasters is not as far removed from new understandings of environment as previously thought. The new materialist ideas and concepts of new spaces that are discussed in this dissertation's introduction have altered understandings of environment to include the types of spaces that comprise Goldsmith's book. As Lefebvre writes, "We are . . . confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on" (8). In Goldsmith's book, these various spaces are thrust together within a textual space—one in which the environmentality of a lived moment is represented in text. Goldsmith's fusion of various spaces reveals how different kinds of spaces come together to compose an environmental experience.

In Goldsmith's book at least three levels of space exist<sup>li</sup>—the physical space (the event itself) is fused and arguably shaped by the cultural space (the media's coverage amid everyday radio chatter) and those layers are further complicated by its reproduction in the textual space of Goldsmith's book, which acknowledges that all experiences are shaped by the cultural conversations that depict them and in turn foregrounds the cultural space through the book's found form. It is in the fusion of these three spaces that Goldsmith constructs his eco-poetics. Depicting particular moments in time through their highly mediated representations in media and foregrounding the poet's intervention in reproducing such representations, Goldsmith's poetics reflects the event itself in a way that is conscious of the layers of perception and language that mediate poetry's accurate reproduction of lived experience. In this sense, Goldsmith's eco-poetics does not emerge

from the depiction of natural or even physical environments but instead through the journalistic expression of a lived moment, which exists in our minds based on the ways we experienced it. Since most Americans were not physically present at the place and time of these seven monumental deaths and disasters, they understand, imagine, and process them through cultural sources of media and alongside their own physical and mental space and time. Thus, the lived experience is not only environmental or physical, but composed of a variety of spaces at once.

In this way, Seven American Deaths and Disasters engages to a radical degree with unnatural environments and lends itself to unnatural ecopoetics because of its interest in environmentality (and the many spaces that comprise it) rather than mimesis. In the first chapter on John F. Kennedy's death, the physical space of the event itself is deeply embedded within the cultural space of media. In one of the first appearances of the disaster in the text, the poem reads:

May we suggest you stock up for the weekend with Texas brewed  
premium Hamm's beer at popular Texas prices. Refreshing as a glass of  
water, that's the taste, fresh taste of Hamm's.

Hey, be sure that you stock up for this weekend with Texas-brewed  
Hamm's beer at popular Texas prices.

And now we take you to KLIF Mobile Unit No. 4 in downtown  
Dallas.

The latest information—and things are rather confused at this  
moment—shots definitely were fired at the presidential motorcade as it  
passed through down town Dallas. All squads are converging code three in  
that area of Elm and Houston in downtown. There is a tentative  
description of the shooting suspect. A man, a white male believed to be  
approximately thirty ears old, reportedly armed with a thirty caliber rifle.  
How many shots were fired, how many persons, if any, were struck and  
wounded, we do not know yet. Very closed-mouthed officials are  
clamping down on the entire story. We'll bring you what details are  
available just as quickly as they come into our possession.

Sandra Dee has her troubles. Listen. A lot's been said about the  
wild teenage thing. But wait till you see the scraped my dad Jimmy

Stewart gets into. Yikes! (SADAD 14-15)

Information on the event itself is revealed slowly throughout the chapter. Since the reports are recorded as information emerges on the events of the day, the broadcasters can only reveal “what details are available.” Readers are thus granted access to the news as it unfolds rather than after the final outcome has been discovered and revealed to the public. What is perhaps most interesting about this passage, though, is the information that accompanies reports of the shooting. Aware of the possibility of tragedy, listeners await further details while listening to beer advertisements and film publicity. As the text moves from selling “Hamm’s beer” to the news that “shots definitely were fired” and finally on to promoting Jimmy Stewart’s latest film, it juxtaposes the various aspects of culture that contextualize and shape conceptions of physical reality.

Elsewhere in the book, Goldsmith discusses the material added to the original event or physical space, contemplating electronic data added to his email of a nursery rhyme. He considers this added material “linguistic marks left by the network ecology” and argues that “the new texts . . . [are] of equal importance to the nursery rhyme. Identifying the sources of those texts and noting their subsequent impact is part of the reading and writing experience” (Goldsmith, UW 31). In essence, he claims that the processes through which the original is transported or expressed leaves “linguistic marks” that alter the original, but these additions are valuable contributions to the experience of the text. In the poem, there are arguably two layers of these marks—first, the advertisements, songs, commentary, and other information that is added to the reports of the physical event of JFK’s death; second, the marks left by the transcription process as the poet selects and organizes the broadcast for the textual space.

The first of these alters conceptions of the event itself as the added material frames JFK's death within the context of reality and fiction. The beer advertisement prompts individuals to "stock up for the weekend" on Hamm's beer, as an escape from reality and the broadcast proceeds through the shooting and immediately into publicity for Jimmy Stewart's films Take Her, She's Mine (1963). The reader is, then, faced with the fiction of momentary escape, confronted with the stark reality of the shooting, and immediately thrust back into the fiction of the film. This material contextualizes the event itself, ultimately altering perceptions of the shooting. The second of these "linguistic marks" appears formally in the poet's transcription. The harsh juxtapositions of reality and fiction are not marked by formal, textual, or stylistic shifts. Each section appears identically in the book without distinguishing the real from the imagined. Michael Kaufmann writes in Textual Bodies: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Print (1994), "Metatextual works break up the print rectangle of the page and make the physical form of the book 'visible' to expose print conventions and the effect of print on language" (14). Goldsmith's book is metatextual both for its foregrounding of the marks left by the transcription, through the poet's choices to begin and end in particular places in the original broadcast, and the marks left by the broadcast on conceptions of the event itself. The two types of "linguistic marks" evident in the book, then, reveal the ways in which cultural and physical space are deeply intertwined and simultaneously foregrounds the textual space through which those connections are exposed. Reading Seven American Deaths and Disasters through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics allows readers to recognize that the hyper-inauthenticity of the textual space highlights the cultural, historical, and personal factors that shape experience.



Goldsmith's deployment of language and form are similarly central to his ecopoetics. Transcribing text directly rather than creating new commentary on the events works alongside developments in contemporary consciousness and foregrounds the limitations of the poem's form. By moving a real-world event into the poem via the cultural dialogue that it generated, the poem highlights the language and form of the event's release to the public, and thus foregrounds its textuality. The act of moving the broadcast to the page raises the reader's awareness of the words as text with agential power. The words are not simply reporting information, but are shaping the way the reader perceives and understands the physical event. In this sense, Goldsmith's re-appropriation and re-contextualization of the broadcasts raises the reader's awareness of their cultural impact. In Notes on Conceptualisms, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman observe that "[c]onceptual writing mediates between the written object (which may or may not be a text) and the meaning of the object by framing the writing as a figural object to be narrated. . . . In this way, conceptual writing creates an object that creates its own disobjectification" (15-16). Contextualized for this discussion, Place and Fitterman's point implies the book takes the broadcast and wrings out the meaning of it through "disobjectification" or denaturalization. Moving the broadcast from its original moment to the page demands close examination of the words as words and ultimately reveals the multiple ways that words function.

The ways in which the poet facilitates these engagements with space are masked behind the book's concept of "uncreative writing." While it may seem impossible for the poet to express his own purpose through the seemingly unoriginal act of transcription, the book actually includes a number of telling creative moments in which Goldsmith's

ecopoetic purpose peaks through. In Uncreative Writing, he claims that “the suppression of self-expression is impossible. Even when we do something as seemingly ‘uncreative’ as retyping a few pages, we express ourselves in a variety of ways. The act of choosing and reframing tells us as much about ourselves as our story about our mother’s cancer operation” (9). In this sense, even in transcription, the poet expresses himself and forwards a particular message. In Seven American Deaths and Disasters, this self-expression appears at the edges in the poet’s choice of events, careful decisions of where to begin and end each section, and in simple choices like where to insert paragraph breaks. By closely analyzing these elements of the book, we can begin to interpret not only the messages of the broadcasts, but even more importantly, Goldsmith’s experiences. Through the poet’s expression of the various elements that compose his real-world experience and his exposure of the edges or constructedness of the text, he reveals that the book does not represent cultural moments or particular environments in isolation; Goldsmith’s unnatural ecopoetics enacts a self-conscious deployment of environmentalism through which subjective experiences—physical, cultural, and personal—are granted significance. Unnatural ecopoetics reveals that Goldsmith’s book is not simply an uncreative or unoriginal rendering of events, but an acknowledgment of how the poet’s (and even reader’s) experiences contribute to environmentalism at least as much as the physical event or environment.

The poet’s subjectivity may initially seem difficult to identify in Seven American Deaths and Disasters because of its found form. Yet, the poet’s self-expression is apparent in the book through his choice of events. The chapters cover John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, John Lennon, the Space Shuttle Challenger, Columbine, the World

Trade Center, and Michael Jackson. The choice to include Michael Jackson but not Martin Luther King, Jr. seems particularly unusual but Goldsmith explains in his “Afterword” that he chose events “based on the fact that they were unraveling in real time, thus highlighting the broadcasters’ uncertainty as to what they were actually describing” (SADAD 174). The prioritization of the “broadcasters’ uncertainty” over the social, cultural, and historical significance of the events themselves suggests that the poet’s purpose is not simply to present important moments from recent history for the reader’s nostalgic remembrance but rather to encourage critical examination of the ways in which events are shaped by their telling. Although the ways that the physical events in the broadcasts are altered by the broadcasts that depict them will be discussed in detail in the coming pages, it is important to first consider what the poet’s prioritization of uncertainty over significance implies. The uncertainty with which the news is broadcast appears to be tied to the poet’s decisions over where to begin and end each section. What is arguably the least “certain” broadcast in the book, the John F. Kennedy section, begins with a loaded and entirely uncontextualized line: “See The Wheeler Dealers” (Goldsmith, SADAD 9). After moving past this unusual opening to the book, the reader discovers that The Wheeler Dealers is a film. Goldsmith’s decision to begin the book with an advertisement for a film initially seems innocuous but actually reveals an important message that runs throughout much of the text. The John F. Kennedy chapter begins with an advertisement and continues to engage with such cultural messages throughout. Foregrounding the presence of advertisements at the beginning of the book emphasizes the ways in which cultural elements shape physical spaces. The poet’s unnatural ecopoetics in this section, then, is evident in his framing of the physical event (the

assassination) with the cultural elements of the advertisement and the broadcast itself because it demonstrates that the physical events of the disasters are dramatically altered by their embedment within advertisements. Through this lens, readers become hyper-aware of the constructedness of the telling, which does not diminish the effectiveness of Goldsmith's rendering of Kennedy's death but arguably makes it more real to the average reader as it prompts him to consider and acknowledge his distance from the physical event itself and the artificiality inherent in his understanding of it.

The poet's decisions about which broadcasts to transcribe are similarly expository of his self-expression. In the John Lennon section of the book, the text is radically foregrounded as Goldsmith transcribes "a cassette tape of a radio scan someone made by flipping through the radio dial on the evening of December 8, 1980" and is followed by "a variety of airchecks" (Goldsmith, SADAD 175). Unlike in the section on John F. Kennedy, the coverage of John Lennon is further complicated by the fusion of a variety of sources, each entirely uncontextualized:

An unspeakable tragedy confirmed to us by ABC News in New York City. John Lennon, outside of his apartment building on the West Side of New York City, the most famous perhaps of all the Beatles, shot twice in the back, rushed to Roosevelt Hospital, dead on arrival. Hard to go back to the game after that newflash. Frank Gifford?

Indeed it is.

...for scenes on December tenth, 1938, the first scenes from the film *Gone With the Wind*. The burning of Atlanta sequence lights the sky for miles ...

We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin from NBC News. Former Beatle John Lennon is dead. Lennon died in a hospital shortly after being shot outside his New York apartment tonight. (SADAD 73)

Jumping from one station to the next, this transcription emphasizes the multiple channels through which language finds the listener and shapes his or her conceptions of the world.

Each station provides a different language that influences how one understands the event itself and the listener's conception of it is further complicated by the unrelated cultural data that accompanies the reports ("scenes from the film *Gone With the Wind*" and "the game"). In this sense, the reports of Lennon's death are accompanied by "linguistic marks" or additional data that influences the listener. The book, though, takes this a step further by placing the confused and jumbled reports in a sequence on the page in which stations are not distinguished from one another and reports on the death are seamlessly attached to reports on football and film.

By pulling the radio broadcasts to the page, Goldsmith highlights the limitations of words. The words do not simply serve as portals for information but are themselves significant in shaping the moment. As Perloff writes, "[t]his is a poetry that conceives of the poem as meaning-making machine and takes its motive from what Adorno termed resistance: the resistance of the individual poem to the larger cultural field of capitalist commodification where language has become merely instrumental" (9). Goldsmith's poems are "meaning-making machine[s]" precisely because he removes the language from its original context and use, making it not "merely instrumental" but formative. It is in the language presented in the book that a textual space is formed; this is a space in which a variety of spaces converge to produce a complex environment. By creating a textual space where language is emphasized as language and not a pseudo-authentic expression of an original moment or object, Goldsmith demonstrates the permanently mediated effects of language, effects that are further emphasized throughout the book through its constant intermingling of real and imagined or physical and cultural moments.

The unnatural ecopoetics of the book is evident in the poet's push to acknowledge

the hyper-inauthenticity of the tellings, which grows from the subjectivity of experience, the authorial incursions in the text, and the cultural influence on each section, but also to demonstrate the value that comes with the text's infusion of multiple spaces. Through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, it is clear that for Goldsmith, the interplay of various spaces on the page make tangible experiences, moments, or even events by recognizing the many elements that constitute environmentality. He writes, “[b]y taking our city’s physical geography and overlaying it with psychogeography—a technique of mapping the psychic and emotional flows of a city instead of its rational street grids—we become more sensitive to our surroundings” (emphasis in original; Goldsmith, UW 37). The same concept can be applied to Seven American Deaths and Disasters by thinking about the physical space as inclusive of the events in the book. Those physical spaces are overlaid with the “psychic and emotional” spaces that accompany them. By pulling that fusion of spaces into the text, though, the ways in which they overlap become particularly apparent to the reader, ultimately foregrounding the complex and multifaceted environments that compose experience. The ways in which various spaces overlap and influence one another is particularly apparent in the section on the World Trade Center. The section begins:

This just in. You are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there. That is the World Trade Center, and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center.

We are right now just beginning to work on this story, obviously calling our sources and trying to figure out exactly what happened. But clearly, something relatively devastating happening this morning here on the south end of the island of Manhattan.

This is, once again, a picture of one of the towers of the World Trade Center.

And as we can see in these pictures, obviously something

devastating that has happened. And again, there are unconfirmed reports that a plane has crashed into one of the towers there. We are efforting more information in the subject as it becomes available to you.  
(Goldsmith, SADAD 127)

The World Trade Center disaster leads the book into recent history, a moment that most living Americans recall with great sadness. Yet, it is an event that the American people learned of primarily through radio and television reports rather than personal experience. The disconnection between the physical event and the culturally constructed mental and emotional space in which most people experienced it makes this disaster particularly helpful in understanding the power that appropriation holds. The poet highlights the discord between the event itself and the broadcasts of it when he explains in his afterword that as he watched The World Trader Center crumble, he listened to “an AM radio station that was narrating the very events [he] was witnessing. There was a strange disconnect—a feeling of simulacra and spectacle—as if this show had been planned and presented the way that, say reality television had recently begun to permeate our lives” (SADAD 171). The disconnection that the poet identifies between the reality of the moment and the telling of it on the radio is precisely what is expressed through the textual space of the poem. In other words, the unnatural ecopoetics of the book lies in its insistence that readers remain cognizant of the inherent artificiality of language and the unavoidable gap between a text and physical reality. As Goldsmith draws the broadcast of this epic disaster into the textual space, the reader becomes aware of his or her distance from the physical event itself and is reminded of the methods by which he or she formulated mental and emotional constructions of it.

Goldsmith exaggerates the distance from which most Americans experienced the

World Trade Center disaster by emphasizing the uncertainty in the reports that irreversibly shaped cultural consciousness of the event. The section begins with an admittance of the report's tentative and immediate nature ("This just in"), immediately informing the reader of the report's ambiguous nature and limited information. The broadcaster begins, though, not by explaining that the information comes from "unconfirmed reports" but instead with a reiteration of the "disturbing" nature of the image or "shot." When the report is pulled into the textual space, it is clear that by beginning with the commentary on the "disturbing" event even before informing the listener of its tentative role, the listeners were immediately inscribed with the event's horror. Of course, the event itself is disturbing and horrific, but Goldsmith's appropriation of this text and his decision to begin the section in this way foregrounds the language throughout which the nation's experience of this event is formulated.

Not present to witness it for themselves, the listeners of this broadcast had their conceptions of it irreversibly shaped. In a large part, this is the product of the broadcaster's uncertainty. As he attempts to comment only on what he sees, he restates the obvious nature of the images ("obviously a very disturbing live shot," "clearly, something relatively devastating happening," and "obviously something devastating"). Decontextualized from the fear and devastation of the event itself through its placement in the textual space, it is clear that the broadcaster's tone of fear and uncertainty are central to national sentiments surrounding the tragedy. Newspaper headlines from September 12, 2001 express similar feelings of "Devastation" and "Terror" as well as "Terrifying" feelings and thoughts of the act's "Unthinkable" nature.<sup>lii</sup> Although these headlines are printed after much more information is released than during this initial



broadcast, and certainly do not definitively show that this single broadcast shaped perceptions of the tragedy, they do reveal that the uncertainty, fear, and disbelief expressed by the broadcaster in Goldsmith's transcription is present in national sentiments about the disaster itself. When viewed in the poetic context, Goldsmith's book reveals the ways the words that revealed the World Trade Center disaster to the public shaped conceptions, responses, and emotional investment in the event itself. In other words, the discourse in which the event was narrated did not only tell the story, but shaped it.

Twelve years after the tragedy, the poet's appropriation of this broadcast into the textual space allows him to distance the reader from the physical space of the event in order to encourage critical thinking about how cultural space, mental space, and historical space influence overall conceptions of 9/11. It is the fusion of these various elements both on the part of the broadcaster and the individual listeners that construct the tragedy. While the physical space is devastating in itself, it is only when intersected with a variety of other elements that the physical gains significance. In the same section, Goldsmith reiterates the power that the cultural space holds over conceptions of the event when the report suddenly cuts to traffic:

We thank you very much for your insight. Why don't we take a quick look at traffic. Debbie, I'm sure traffic has got to be a mess. Debbie, are you there?

Yes I am. Um, traffic is a nightmare. All the bridges and tunnels getting into the city are being shut down right now. Lincoln, Holland, George. Shut. Forget about it. Turn around. Go back home. Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. Closed. Brooklyn Bridge, Williamsburg, Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, again the Manhattan Bridge, uh, everything being closed heading into the city. And of course you want to avoid the area of the Twin Towers right now. You have tons of emergency vehicles there. And also all the area airports are closed, uh, Newark, Kennedy, LaGuardia, all the major

airports are shut down. So again, avoid this area of the city. It is a nightmare” (Goldsmith, SADAD 136).

The unexpected shift to traffic here is reminiscent of Goldsmith’s earlier book, Traffic, in which the transcription of traffic broadcasts reveals the extent to which traffic dictates the patterns of everyday life in the city. In his earlier book, the poet implies that transportation has consumed contemporary existence to the point that everything else is dictated by the traffic. The broadcaster’s turn to regularly scheduled segments in this passage reveals the ways in which cultural elements are privileged or at least considered equal to material reality in contemporary society. Familiar with a particular schedule for the show, even when faced with an unprecedented disaster, the broadcaster engages in the mundane cultural dialogue of traffic and in the following paragraph an oddly ineffective warning to his television audience about television broadcast unavailability (Goldsmith, SADAD 136). The broadcaster’s impulse to report news even when it is irrelevant to the situation or the audience demonstrates the power of cultural space even in the midst of a pressing event in the physical space.

The sudden turn to traffic in the midst of the twin towers tragedy is unexpected and seemingly out of place and engages in unusual if largely irrelevant and unnecessary details on the traffic problems across the city. Debbie’s use of the word “nightmare” twice throughout the segment not in reference to the twin towers disaster but to traffic reveals a particular insensitivity to or perhaps disengagement from the tragedy at hand. By calling the traffic, a comparatively insignificant detail of the day, a “nightmare” when confronted with the real-life “nightmare” of the attack, Debbie reveals the equal importance of cultural space and physical space in today’s society. Although the physical

disaster of the twin towers is a pressing concern, the broadcaster's nightmarish depiction of the cultural—the city's traffic flow—reveal that regardless of the outcome, the two are equally important. The physical does not take precedence over the cultural space, but both exist simultaneously in the broadcast.

Similarly, her needless reporting of seemingly obvious information like the closure of bridges, tunnels, and airports is exacerbated by the unnecessary detail of listing which venues are closed (“All of the bridges and tunnels getting into the city are being shut down right now. Lincoln, Holland, George. Shut. Forget about it”). After indicating that “[a]ll of the bridges and tunnels” are closed, Debbie continues to list specific closures and then wittily tells listeners to “[f]orget about it” and “[t]urn around.” She similarly warns listeners to “avoid the area of the Twin Towers” and explains that “all the area airports are closed” but then proceeds to list them by name (“Newark, Kennedy, LaGuardia, all the major airports are shut down”). Providing repetitive and unnecessary details, the broadcaster reveals the sense of confusion plaguing the nation but simultaneously demonstrates the instinctual turn in contemporary society toward prescribed cultural frames. In his review of Goldsmith's book, “The Words We Heard as Horrors Sank In: ‘Seven American Deaths and Disasters’ Transcribes the News,” Dwight Garner of The New York Times writes, “[h]is book is about the sounds our culture makes when the reassuring smooth jazz of much of our broadcast media breaks down, when disc jockeys and news anchors are forced to find words for events that are nearly impossible to describe. This book is about language under duress” (par. 7). By framing the disaster through the traffic problems plaguing the city and providing the inconsequential details of those problems, the horror of the day is made more ordinary, more acceptable, and more

easily processed. If the broadcasters report closures, traffic, and outages as they do daily, the attack is perhaps less real and less frightening. The unnatural ecopoetics of the scene lies in its insistence on the mundane and emphasis on the uncertainty, fear, and confusion in the cultural depiction of real-world events. By highlighting the subjectivity in the cultural narrative, the poem reveals that language has the ability to shape real-world events in the minds of listeners and thus maintains a textual space all its own.

In the book, the newcasters' avoidance of the real physical event that is facilitated by the traffic report is challenged a few paragraphs later when the trivial is juxtaposed with the serious. The transcription of the broadcast cuts from traffic reports to television signals and finally to people jumping from the building. In these shifts, Goldsmith's poem shows the unreality of the television report and the superficiality of its segments face reality as real people in the building jump to their deaths. As the broadcaster shows images of the World Trade Center, he comments:

It is a terrible scene. People are just walking down the street with their hands covering their mouth in disbelief. They can't believe it. And then you hear the sirens and people screaming as they look up at the building and see people trying to get out and some people jumping. Now, the EMS is here, fire personnel, police, everyone's here trying to keep calm and get everyone away from the building and keep it safe. Let's listen.

...but, um, I did see someone jump. I did. And I talked to someone and in her own voice you could hear it and she just lost it...

...they...they're throwing themselves off the building. Oh my God.

(Goldsmith, SADAD 136-7)

The broadcaster begins by commenting on the scene with relative objectivity and composure. He narrates the terror of the image and explains that "some people [are] jumping." However, the broadcast then begins to listen to an unspecified source who reignites the true horror of the scene when he or she hesitates to explain that the people in

the building “they...they’re throwing themselves off the building.” Although the poet does not clarify whether the source has changed in this segment, it is clear that the poem has jumped from the television broadcaster to someone more deeply enmeshed in the scene—perhaps a firefighter or policeman. By juxtaposing the tone of the broadcaster who represents the cultural dialogue that illustrates, explains, and informs the public of the disaster with the commentary of an individual enmeshed in the physical event itself, Goldsmith highlights the ways in which depictions of events and events themselves are often extremely different. What is perhaps most interesting about this, though, is that the broadcaster, the disconnected voice in the above passages, is the voice that the majority of the nation relies on for information, thus formulating national opinions and conceptions of the World Trade Center disaster through his highly mediated and arguably skewed telling of it. Nevertheless, this cultural space of the media shapes public conceptions of the physical space of the disaster itself. In highlighting the influence of culture and personal experience, Goldsmith employs an unnatural ecopoetics that insists on the hyper-inauthenticity of the text in order to expose the constant influence of personal and cultural elements on environmental experience.

## **Conclusion**

By drawing media broadcasts into the textual space, Seven American Deaths and Disaster allows the reader to look into the various elements that compose environmentality. The textual space foregrounds the presence of multiple spaces by drawing a cultural document of familiar national disasters to a page, which demands close reading, critical analysis, deep consideration, and theorization. Once the broadcasts

become poems, they are viewed in a different light than their original format. The reader of the poem is looking for irregularities, problems, contradictions, and connections that the radio listener in the moment does not recognize. As Harold Bloom writes in The Art of Reading Poetry (2004), “Language, to a considerable extent, is concealed figuration: ironies and synecdoches, metonymies and metaphors that we recognize only when our awareness increases. Real poetry is aware of and exploits these ruined tropes” (5). While Bloom may not recognize Goldsmith’s work as “real poetry,” Seven American Deaths and Disasters engages in the “concealed figuration” that he identifies here by ironically appropriating a highly mediated cultural document to illustrate the variety of spaces that influence the ways individuals experience particular moments or events. By acknowledging and reading Goldsmith’s book in this way, it becomes clear that there is no national experience of the disasters included in the book, but only individual ones. The experience is subjective, shaped by a variety of factors including the mental space, memories, emotional investment, location, distractions, and the cultural dialogue through which the individual learns of the event. In this sense, the lens of unnatural ecopoetics reveals that Goldsmith’s book foregrounds textual space through its conceptual form and within that space, exposes the intertwining of material and nonmaterial elements of human experience and the agential power that they hold over conceptions of reality.

Goldsmith’s extraction of broadcasts from a variety of disasters into the textual space foregrounds the diverse ways in which individuals encounter those events. The book makes it clear that the cultural space is irreversibly tied to how individuals experience the physical space and that the two are always intertwined. The poet acknowledges the subjectivity of experience when he comments, “the suppression of self-

expression is impossible. Even when we do something as seemingly ‘uncreative’ as retyping a few pages, we express ourselves in a variety of ways,” which leads his students to believe that the “uncreative” tasks assigned by the poet led to the most creative work they have ever produced (Goldsmith, UW 9). His explanation of the diverse ways in which his students complete a seemingly uncreative project reveals the power in Goldsmith’s poetics and the underlying sentiment of Seven American Deaths and Disasters. An unnatural ecopoetic approach to Goldsmith’s book reveals that individual experiences of particular moments are entirely subjective, always mediated by elements that are unique to each place, time, and person. Any attempt to express a real experience must account for this subjectivity and embrace the uncertainty inherent in any perception. An individual is bound to impose new information, select and exclude data, and imbue any encounter with his or her ideologies, experiences, memories, and agendas.

It is Goldsmith’s recognition of both the material and nonmaterial elements of real-world experience and his willingness to foreground those elements in his poetry that makes his work an ideal text for unnatural ecopoetic critique. Unlike earlier conceptions of the term, the brand of ecopoetics that I propose in this dissertation, unnatural ecopoetics, specifically engages poetics like Goldsmith’s, that foreground the complex interrelation of material and nonmaterial aspects of experience. Some critics may argue that Seven American Deaths and Disasters is not an ecopoem and should not be considered for ecopoetic critique because of its lack of attention to the natural world. Indeed, Goldsmith’s work is uninterested in the natural environment, but like Lyn Hejinian, his poetics is invested in examination of perception, investigating the ways in which individual experience the world around them. Goldsmith does not consider how a

physical space is represented in text but rather examines the multiple spaces that compose a lived moment. That experience is not made up of only one type of perception but is influenced and shaped by personal elements of memory, mood, and individual investment as well as larger social factors such as cultural dialogue, history, politics, and physical space. Even within larger social factors, each individual will recognize, prioritize, ignore, leave out, or emphasize particular facets of that element. In short, the individual experience is not surprisingly subjective.

While ecopoetic theory does not often recognize the ways non-physical spaces are manifested in poetry, reading Goldsmith's book through this lens reveals that ecopoetics can reveal new spaces and environments. In this way, ecopoetic critique is useful beyond blatantly green or even overtly environmental texts and becomes useful in considering space on a broad level. As Edward W. Soja writes in Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places (1996), scholars must move away from the traditional duality of physical and imagined space for the realization that "[e]verything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history" (emphasis in original; Soja 56-57). Engaging with this new open space allows ideas of environment to more readily engage with contemporary life. Space is not only the physical environment around us or the imagined environment of the mind but a fusion of countless elements in between. For ecopoetics, this shift demonstrates that even in the least eco-oriented poetry, spaces are at the fore, interrelating in complex and surprising ways. It is in these unlikely



spaces that ecopoetic theory can begin to expand beyond conceptions of environments as purely physical and begin to embrace their metaphysical elements with equal enthusiasm and importance. The shift toward these new spaces does not discount the demand for real-world action demanded in much ecopoetic theory, but instead allows the field to embrace new types of activism that are transnational, culturally diverse, and inclusive of a wide array of American poetry.

## CONCLUSION

### THE FUTURE OF ECOPOETICS IN NEW POETRIES AND NEW SPACES

I began working on ecopoetics while living in Long Beach, California, a city engulfed by the highly urban space of Los Angeles. Ecopoetic theory, in the early 2000s, did account for poetry that engages with nature, even urban nature, but the majority of my environment was entirely unnatural and ecopoetics had no way of dealing specifically with the built aspects of the city. While ecopoetics raised interesting questions about how environments make their way into poetry, it did not account for or even attempt to interact with most of the poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much of which rises from urban spaces and all of which is deeply embedded within physical, textual, and personal space. With these oversights in ecopoetics, it may seem easier to simply toss the term aside and conjure up something new that better accounts for a broader swath of contemporary poetry and other modes of experimental and lyrical language, but to do so would ignore the sense of environmental significance and formal engagement with space that ecopoetics has contributed to literary studies. The term ecopoetics is certainly evolving but should not be discounted for its root. The concept of “eco” is itself changing and we are coming to recognize the permeability of its borders—“ecological” does not simply point to trees, weeds, or beaches but extends into the recesses of the human body and the nuances of experiences in the material world. Instead

of bolstering the dichotomy between “human” and “nature,” what I’m calling unnatural ecopoetics recognizes movements in poetry and other forms of language to overcome this supposed gap through the textual space. Unnatural ecopoetics allows for the recognition of naturalcultural elements in a wide array of contemporary poetry, much of which has long been excluded from the realm of ecocriticism and had its environmentality marginalized or entirely ignored in poetry studies. As unnatural ecopoetics breaks away from the assumed parallel between “eco” and “natural” and moves toward naturalcultural conceptualizations of environment, the term analyzes how texts use self-reflexive language and formal experimentation to create a textual space where material and nonmaterial elements of environmentality are uncovered.

The shift to unnatural ecopoetics follows the trajectory of ecocritical theory, which increasingly broadens its applications beyond overtly natural texts and challenges the constrictions within the idea of “nature.” In its movement away from traditional conceptions of nature, my term responds to Timothy Morton’s contention that “[e]cocriticism is too enmeshed in the ideology that churns out stereotypical ideas of nature to be of any use” (13). Morton’s proclamation challenges ecocritics to address the problematic undertones of the word “nature,” which he identifies as stereotyped because it is conceptualized as something that is other and “over there” rather than something that is ever-present in experience. In other words, the term “nature,” although purporting to represent the physical world beyond language and ideology, is always wrapped up in the ideologies of the writer. When the word “nature” is deployed, the reader is only exposed to an artificial other and never looks at his or her own physical reality. At issue here is the environmental responsibilities that are overlooked when nature is viewed as something

“over there” and fail to recognize that it is, in fact, all around. For ecocritics, this problem has arisen throughout the sub-field of environmental justice ecocriticism, through which scholars consider how striving for stereotypical ideas of “nature” has allowed for the oversight of many real-world problems that exist often invisibly, below the surface, quietly, and in non-aesthetic ways. As a result, these issues are often left out of “nature,” making the term itself skewed by the ideology behind it. For Morton, the term “nature” allows for a disconnection from a meaningful relationship between human individuals and the physical world. He writes, “nature keeps giving writers the slip. And in all its confusing, ideological intensity, nature ironically impedes a proper relationship with the earth and its life-forms, which would, of course, include ethics and science” (Morton 2). In pointing out that the term nature is impeding ethical and scientific relationships with the earth, Morton gestures toward the environmental concerns that lie beneath the surface of what is thought of as “nature” and touches on concerns within environmental justice movements for built spaces and the people within them. As writers allow the term “nature” to impede expressions of the naturalcultural reality of contemporary experiences in the world, the word ceases to represent as intended and instead evokes a set of ideologically, historically, and even politically charged sentiments.

In the past decade, ecocritics have broadened their field by considering new genres and new types of environments, including urban environments, but even today there is, as evidenced by Morton’s project, a great deal of concern over the distance between ideas of nature, often represented as disconnected from the urban experience familiar to much of the world’s population, and reality. In her 2012 PMLA article on sustainability, “Beyond Imagining, Imagining Beyond,” Lynn Keller argues that

[n]ature writing as it has developed from traditions of the pastoral contributes valuably to readers' appreciation of the given world . . . [yet r]eceived ideas of nature codified in such writing tend, as many have noted, to position nature as something apart from the human, making it difficult to conceptualize ways for large populations to live appropriately in and with nature. (581)

In other words, by placing value only on traditional concepts of nature, one ignores those places and people who live in them where the natural is tied up in human constructions rather than apart from them. Traditional writing about nature presents a similar risk; rather than demonstrating how individuals can connect to and appreciate their world, writing about “nature” demonstrates how distanced most individuals are from that natural world that is viewed as “over there,” outside the boundaries of the city. By moving away from “nature,” as Morton suggests, ecocriticism can overcome ideologies that value one kind of space over another, a distinction that often results in environmental injustice because neighborhoods that are typically composed of poor racial minorities, when judged by the standard of “nature” as pastoral, wild, pure, and thus valuable, are viewed as less aesthetically pleasing, less valuable, and less in need of preservation or protection. Propelling ecopoetics toward unnatural ecopoetics contributes to this ongoing movement in ecocriticism as it compels critics to think through nature to more inclusive conceptions of naturalcultural elements of environmentality.

The push toward environmentality is the cutting-edge of ecocritical scholarship. As ecocriticism embarks on its fourth wave, renewed interest in things troubles the boundaries between natural and unnatural or material and nonmaterial. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann present the concept of “[m]aterial ecocriticism, [which] is the study of the way material forms—bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals,

organic and inorganic manner, landscapes, and biological entities—intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories” (Material Ecocriticism 7). Pointing ecocritical theory toward acknowledging non-human agency and the importance of all forms of matter, material ecocriticism demands that critical perspectives account for the various elements in the universe that are always intra-acting and shaping one another. In doing so, material ecocriticism propels theory toward the sentiments of unnatural ecopoetics, which provides a critical lens that considers how those various elements are acknowledged and expressed textually. Coupled with the work of scholars like Scott Knickerbocker, Jonathan Skinner, and Brenda Iijima, who push the boundaries of ecopoetics, the concept of material ecocriticism represents an important bridge between ecocritical poetry studies and the changing view of what “nature” is and where its boundaries lie in contemporary literary criticism. Unnatural ecopoetics builds on previous work in material ecocriticism and ecopoetics, bringing the two fields together by acknowledging naturecultures in unlikely spaces and broadening the reach of both fields into texts that are distinctly concerned with unnatural settings and cultural elements.

### **The Future of Ecopoetics**

Until now, ecopoetics has struggled to move beyond the search for remnants of nature in a poem. In doing so, it ignores the majority of environmental interactions, which are not distinctly natural. What makes ecopoetics so rigidly confined to traditional conceptions of nature even when ecocriticism has so clearly moved beyond such limitations? I present this question without a clear answer, but this dissertation is my case

for why and how ecopoetics can break through its prior usages and open up exciting new paths for ecocritical poetry studies. By removing the oft-assigned equivalency between ecological and natural and instead recognizing the environmentality of various kinds of spaces, even unnatural ones, we can look to new applications of ecopoetic theory in unlikely spaces. Unnatural ecopoetics illuminates how poems create a foregrounded textual space, using formal experimentation and self-reflexive language, where naturalcultural elements of environmental experiences are exposed and made active.

It is my hope that this dissertation will inspire scholars to explore the possibilities of unnatural ecopoetics in bridging the gap that has long existed between ecocriticism and poetry studies. As this dissertation demonstrates, contemporary poetry is particularly suitable for such explorations as poets constantly challenge assumptions about what constitutes poetry and the limitations of space. Radical poets and artists like Robert Grenier, Christian Bök, and Patrick Haemmerlein play with medium and language to create works that straddle the boundaries between poetry, art, environment, and even biology, while writers like Vanessa Place<sup>liii</sup> present textual environments constructed on the boundary of poetry and prose and inundated with the influence of space. These texts, although not all poetry and, for many readers, contestable examples of ecopoetry, are fundamentally interested in how form and language work together to express the naturalcultural elements of environmentality within the textual space. As unnatural ecopoetics continues to develop, it will provide a critical lens through which literary scholars can consider how environment, text, and personal experience fuse in art as they do in real-world experiences. The future of ecopoetics, in fact, demands looking beyond traditional iterations of environments and recognizing the environmentality of

naturalcultural fusions, even when those fusions are subtly expressed.

Bök, for instance, who is perhaps best known for his exploration of “living poetry” through the injection of text into a sequence of DNA in “The Xenotext Experiment,” presents a poetics uniquely intertwined with the physical world through his union of poetry and science. Making biology a site for poetics, Bök’s work presents new challenges for poetry studies and ecopoetics alike. His premise, though, is entirely environmental as the experiment itself is hinged upon the possibility of “extend[ing] poetry itself beyond the formal limits of the book” and into the world beyond the page (Bök, “Xenotext” 230). Approaching his experiment through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics allows readers to acknowledge the environmentality of the text regardless of its medium. While the poet reaches beyond the traditional realms of text and nature, his poem is arguably as natural as poetry can ever be since “when translated into a gene and then integrated into the cell, the text nevertheless gets “expressed” by the organism, which, in response to this grafted, genetic sequence, begins to manufacture a viable, benign protein—a protein that, according to the original, chemical alphabet, is itself another text” (Bök, “Xenotext” 229). The organism produces a text, creating a poetic space within a living creature. In this sense, the poet’s experiment uses textual play and formal experimentation to literally reveal naturalcultural fusions within the textual space—in this case, the organism expresses its own environmentality in the cellular language implanted by the poet. At the same time, the material element of Bök’s text, namely the organism itself, is granted agency in its ability to “express” or act in its influence on the poem that is produced, a power that can only be realized within the textual space created by the poet.



The ecopoetic implications of “The Xenotext” are perhaps more evident in one of the poet’s more conventional texts. In Bök’s Crystallography (2003), for instance, the poet contends that words don’t mimic their environment but actually create their own reality, their own space—a textual space. The speaker reveals in the book’s opening that “A crystal assembles itself out of its own constituent / disarray” and reiterates that it orients itself only “by chance into its correct location” (Bök, Crystallography 12). The poet’s recognition of the random order of a crystal is directly compared to language only a few stanzas later:

A compound (word) dissolved in a liquid  
supercooled under microgravitational  
conditions precipitates out of solution  
in (alphabetical) order to form crystals  
\*\*\*

A word is a bit of crystal in formation. (Bök, Crystallography 12)

Comparing language to chemistry, the speaker claims that words are transformed into something meaningful, something ordered. In a sense, like crystals, words combine randomly to create a structure, an alphabet, which carries meaning. Creating the parallel between crystalline structure and language, the poet implies that words engage in a living process in which meaning grows and changes based on their counterparts and their environments. The recognition that language takes meaning from its position in its space, relative to its surroundings, is inherently ecopoetic. Although Bök’s poetry often lies on the precipice between poetry and science, his writing engages with an investigation into language and form that is uniquely suited to an unnatural ecopoetic critique because his challenge to fixed mediums and forms rises from the same inquiry into boundaries between language and biology or, put more broadly, culture and nature that lie at the

heart of unnatural ecopoetics.

Bök's poetry, like Goldsmith's, elects to engage with new mediums in order to better express the naturalcultural elements of real-world experience in text. While serving different examples, both poets use unique mediums to move beyond the limitations of language and recognize its multiplicity. In a sense, by reading the unconventional and sometimes extra-poetic work of poets like Bök and Goldsmith through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, scholars not only draw new types of texts into ecocritical critique but also propel the field away from one of its most restrictive limitations—writing itself. Responding to Morton's charge that writing encounters the "slippery, tricksterish qualities of never quite meaning what it says or saying what it means," unnatural ecopoetics focuses on self-reflexivity and looks to any text, whether extra-poetic or more conventional poetic forms, where language's limitations are recognized and formally foregrounded (31). Morton identifies a challenge with which ecocriticism has since been contending. He rightly identifies the instability in written representations of nature and, indeed, the risk or trick of its failure. Morton's proposed solution, which he calls "ecomimesis" aims "to go beyond the aesthetic dimension altogether. It wants to break out of the normative aesthetic frame, go beyond art" (31). Here, Morton is highlighting the need to recognize the artificiality in representation—not attempting to hide the literary construction, but to foreground it.

Unnatural ecopoetics engages with Morton's charge by recognizing and embracing the artificiality and subjectivity inherent in the writing process. From here, as the previous chapters illustrate, unnatural ecopoetics has the potential to enhance understandings of a variety of texts that do not overtly engage with nature but engage

deeply with their environmentality and might even reach beyond the boundaries of the text or the poem into new mediums and genres that actively participate in their own constructedness is, in fact, not a byproduct but an essential part of their works' textual space. Consider, for instance, the drawn poems of Robert Grenier or even more overtly visual forms of expression in the mixed media work of artists like Patrick Haemmerlein.<sup>liv</sup> The challenge to textual fixity that is emphasized in the unnatural ecopoetic readings of chapters two and three, might be further exaggerated in relation to Grenier's drawn poems.

Grenier's poems present unique challenges for poetic critique but new possibilities when approached through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics. The poems lie between visual art and poetry as they employ drawn letters to form lines, each of which is identifiable by its color. Ondrea E. Ackerman considers the materiality of letters themselves and Grenier's emphasis on their constructedness in "Wandering Lines: Robert Grenier's Drawing Poems." She writes, "Grenier's poetry, however strange and unconventional it may be, is about the production of letters out of their material component parts—the physical and visual lines" (Ackerman 135). As Ackerman argues, much of Grenier's project involves foregrounding the letter as a constructed object and one that brings with it a great deal of subjectivity. In one poem, which the poet himself clarifies for readers in "Drawing Poems/'Rough' Translations," it is clear that Grenier's letters are not easily decipherable and present some challenges for readers in ensuring they are accurately interpreting the poem's content. Only after a great deal of inspection and from familiarity with the poet's handwriting (from analyzing a number of his drawn poems), can one begin to decode the drawn letters and attain the words that make the

poem. With the help of the poet himself,<sup>lv</sup> we can conclude that his poem reads “MOOER (green), MOOS (red), MOO (blue), AT (black)” (Grenier, “Drawing Poems” 7). Once one finally deciphers the words themselves, he or she might question, as Ackerman does, what it means to “moo,” what is a “mooer,” and what might it “moo / at” (135).

Ultimately, Grenier’s foregrounding of the constructedness of words directly informs interpretations of the words themselves. Once the reader has been prompted to question the accuracy and fixity of the words themselves, he or she is forced to consider the authenticity of their meanings or whether they accurately represent their real-world counterpart. In this case, the words are translations of real-world experience (sound) into language but the textual depiction of the sounds is embellished, revealing its radical dissimilarity to the sound itself and exaggerating the impossibility of an authentic rendering of heard, especially non-human, sounds to language. The apparent constructedness of the letters coupled with the obviously inauthentic sound implications of the words reveals a lived experience of the sounds while avoiding what Morton calls the “slippery, tricksterish qualities of never quite meaning what it says or saying what it means.” Grenier’s poems never claim to stand in for an experience or to express nature, but rather to capture experience in its inauthentic and entirely constructed glory and ensure that readers are aware of the inevitable gap between lived experience and textual renderings of it through the highly mediated textual space of the poem.

The poet’s interest in capturing experience is precisely what situates his work for ecopoetic readings. Another series of drawn poems, For Larry Eigner, reveals Grenier’s struggle with the relationship between lived experience and language and makes it clear how the lens of unnatural ecopoetics might present new possibilities for reading his work.

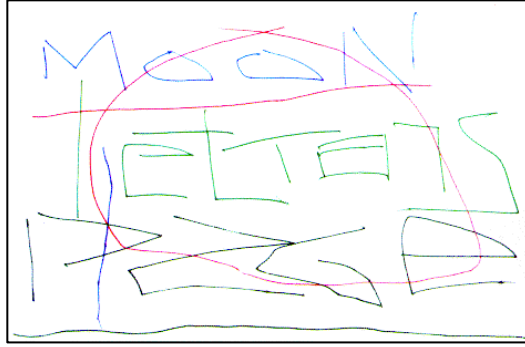
(fig. 1, Grenier, For Larry Eigner 6)(fig. 2, Grenier, For Larry Eigner 12)

Fig. 1 appears to read “moon / letters / page” and includes a red circle with a line through it (red ink). One of his most legible drawn poems, shown in fig. 2, appears to read “A Natural / Language / couldn’t / be.” In both poems, Grenier’s self-reflexive language comments on the inevitable distance between language and nature. He clearly distinguishes the physical (“moon”) from its translation to language (“letters”) and its final placement in text (on the “page”) in fig. 1. In fig. 2, though, the later poem in the For Larry Eigner sequence, the poet dismisses the possibility of reconciling the unadulterated physical world with language as he implies that language can never be “natural.” Moving past the quest for language to express nature, the sequence embraces the immediacy of the moment and the experience in all of its mediated wonder.



(fig. 3, Grenier, For Larry Eigner 13)

Here, the image takes precedence. Fig. 3 appears to read “water / at night.” In direct contrast to the previous poem, fig. 3 questions the need for language as it turns unequivocally to the image. By making reading difficult, Grenier institutes a self-reflexivity into his texts, which he explains in Farming the Words: Talking with Robert Grenier (2009). The poet clarifies the purpose of self-reflexive language when he explains that his hope with his drawn poems is that “nobody can recognize what they are . . . and then there might be some hope for seeing what’s being said as actually happening in the place where it occurs. One thing that might happen in the ‘ecopoetics scene,’ roughly . . . is that there might be a reverse projection of the condition of the environment which would emanate from language” (59). Grenier’s proclamation that scholars of ecopoetics might consider how environment “emanate[s] from language” rather than the other way around, illuminates the textuality of his work. When poetry is revealed for its textual limitations, as it is through the ambiguity of language in Grenier’s drawn poems, it ceases to attempt mimesis but instead becomes a site in itself or a textual space.

Reading Grenier’s poetry through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics reveals that language and form come together even in extra-poetic texts to create a foregrounded textual space where the naturalcultural elements of environmental experience, including

not only material factors but also the various nonmaterial memories, thoughts, emotions, and distractions that permeate the perceiver's mind, are exposed. In other areas of visual art, the union of these very elements is even more pronounced. Found poetry is perhaps the most obvious example of where visual poetry is heading in the twenty-first century. The Found Poetry Review<sup>lvi</sup> and other such forums, which are dedicated to foregrounding the poetics of everyday life, demonstrate that poetry is always present in the world and only needs to be properly contextualized in order to be received for its poetic underpinnings. Patrick Haemmerlein's work, for instance, engages with environment diversely by including not only material elements of space but also the nonmaterial subjective factors that influence the artist.



(fig. 4, Haemmerlein)

In fig. 4, “Your All Just Feathers in My Nest,” Haemmerlein gathers objects from his immediate surroundings, namely the streets of Los Angeles, including extra-textual references in the form of old books and naturalcultural objects like wood (a perfect union

of nature and culture in its natural origins in a tree and its cultural use as construction material) gathered from the region and fuses them into a collage that is framed by his own creative and entirely subjective experience in a particular place and time. The artist explains, “[y]our all just feathers in my nest was a tag I saw on the streets of LA. It’s just what the Universe provided that day, my artwork works a lot that way, a lot of it is created with luck and chance and things I come across – books, places and, in this case, a street tag” (Haemmerlein). In fig. 4, then, the material space of Los Angeles, including its natural and cultural elements, is literally infused into a creative rendering of the space in a particular moment. In its introduction to his show, The Porch Gallery in Ojai, California explains Hammerlein’s creative process in detail: “[c]reating only from photographs he takes, Patrick layers his imagery on found wood & recycled book pages and then applies watercolors to bring the artwork to life” (“Porch Gallery”). In this sense, his work literally employs its place through its infusion of found objects ranging from wood to street tags, but all the while acknowledges its own artificiality by enhancing the unreality of the photo through watercolors. Choosing to exaggerate his own subjective experience of the scene rather than leaving the seemingly real image of the photo itself, Haemmerlein foregrounds what I see as a textual space, where his own role as artist is revealed, and subsequently exposes the influence of nonmaterial elements on the piece, including the artist’s thoughts, memories, and emotions. The artist includes the material components of the street tag, wood, and the found pages of prose, sheet music, dictionary definitions, and other texts from all around the world with his nonmaterial influences, ultimately rendering the specific cityscape before him as a visual text that foregrounds a naturalcultural environment.



Unnatural eco-poetics provides a path for analyzing a variety of texts, including visual ones, that engage various material and nonmaterial elements of environmentality while recognizing inability of any text to accurately translate an objective reality to the page. Haemmerlein's work, then, is suitable for unnatural eco-poetic critique despite its position as visual art because it is cognizant of its own artificiality through its intentionally unreal watercolor scenes. While maintaining the value of local natural and cultural material objects, his work recognizes the ties between the local and the global through the variety of texts employed, and remains hinged upon his own nonmaterial subjective experience. By recognizing how unnatural eco-poetics can enlighten understandings of visual art, both in relation to visual poets like Grenier and overtly visual work, like Haemmerlein's, readers can begin to recognize that eco-poetics extends into poetic sentiment, ranging from writing style to visual arts that actively engage with form and language while acknowledging its own inherent constructedness. Just as poetics is not limited to texts organized in rigidly structured lines, eco-poetics is useful in analyzing large swaths of texts, both extra-poetic and more traditional poetic forms.

In reading beyond the specific form of poetry and into other genres that engage poetic methodologies, unnatural eco-poetics, like poetics more generally, becomes something that extends beyond traditional poetry. In contemporary poetry, the movement away from the line is evidenced by the rise of prose poetry, found poems, and other highly conceptual poetic gestures that challenge the assumption that poetics is limited to its traditional manifestations. Yet, unnatural eco-poetics encourages readers to consider how environments become present in a wide variety of texts that display poetic sensibilities, including prose. I contend that through this new lens, readers can recognize

how textual space functions even in prose in order to express the naturalcultural elements of environmentality.

Vanessa Place's 2008 novel, La Medusa, demonstrates the promise of an unnatural ecopoetic critique of prose. The novel is a literary collage of the voices of Place's many characters—ranging from a conscious corpse to a young girl to a trucker and his wife—with medical definitions, photographs, ink blots, poetry, physical landmarks, literary references, formal intrusions, fairy tales, and screenplay directives. Blatantly disruptive, the novel presents the reader with the challenge of unraveling its many elements and discovering the meaning of its title. While Place's book is a novel, it is poetic in its investment in form and figurative language. Through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, the novel creates a textual space where the naturalcultural material and nonmaterial elements of various experiences of Los Angeles are made active. As various characters present their subjective encounters with the place, the novel's fragmented structure intermingles those facets of experience with the material elements of the city on the page. In the textual space of the novel, the naturalcultural elements of experience are moved to the fore.

To create a textual space, Place foregrounds the constructedness of the text and employs self-reflexive language that emphasizes the distance between words and the reality they purport to express. The novel's textuality is made apparent through constant intrusions in the text, which remind the reader of the formal constructedness of the page. Such moments occur throughout the novel in the author's use of screenplay directives or slug lines, which place particular sections in one character's consciousness and in a specific physical location ("INT. MYLES P.'S SEMI-RTE. 40, OUTSIDE FLAGSTAFF,

AZ-DAY,” “EXT. JORGE’S HOUSE-OAKWOOD, VENICE-DAY”) (Place, La Medusa 17, 23). These slug lines are used to locate and describe scenes in screenplays, but in Place’s novel they not only locate and describe but also initiate the reader into a particular consciousness while simultaneously implicating the artificiality of Hollywood and its robust film culture. The slug lines mark disruptions in the text by indicating shifting perspectives and thus make the reader hyper-aware of the text itself. Such awareness is enhanced by the novel’s use of formal intrusions, including lines, boxes, and unusual spatial arrangements on the page. The book begins with a six-line “Intro” followed by a dashed line with the words “tear here” below it (Place, La Medusa 15). A similar line appears just before the “Outro” of the book, indicating that the reader should “detach at perforation” (Place, La Medusa 459). The lines direct the reader to acknowledge the page as paper, which can be cut or torn. In much the same way, Place’s continual usage of text boxes, which separate one section of text from another, and atypical spatial arrangements that displace one part of the text or leave white space on the page, demand that the reader acknowledge the constructedness of the text or, put another way, to recognize the text as text.

The formal insistence on the textuality of the novel is aided by the author’s juxtaposition of photos of the brain with medical definitions of its parts and diagrams of their particular anatomical locations. There are different iterations of this definition/diagram/photo paradigm throughout the book, beginning with the “Pineal Gland,” which “[r]egulates circadian rhythm” and then moving to the “Hippocampus,” which is “significant in temporary storage of new declarative (facts/events) memory, not involved in procedural (motor skill/routine) memory; negligible for consciousness;

essential for the autobiographical self” (Place, La Medusa 16, 82). Recurring twelve times throughout the novel,<sup>lvii</sup> these brief moments act self-reflexively as they juxtapose verbal description of how the brain functions with visual images of the organ and scientific maps of where the part is located on the brain. In these moments, the reader becomes distinctly aware of the difference between verbal accounts and visual images. While the definitions describe the brain’s functions, they do not reflect the anatomical location or the appearance of the structure in the brain. Words are revealed as distinctly different from reality in these recurring moments. The author’s insistence on the constructedness of the text and the limitations of language throughout the novel make La Medusa a promising site for unnatural ecopoetic critique because it foregrounds textual space.

With its creation of a textual space, Place’s novel demonstrates how material and nonmaterial elements can be revealed and how they can attain the power to express themselves with equal force. When reading through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, critics realize that La Medusa presents the city of Los Angeles both as a physical site with material elements and a nonmaterial idea with its sprawling freeways and endlessly intertwining narratives as a medusa-like space. The material aspects of the city are integrated into the narrative through regular references to popular Los Angeles landmarks and cultural touchstones.<sup>lviii</sup> However, in an “interior” aside, although the speaker in this moment is ambiguous, the city is described as

a place mostly imagined . . . with this shore which spreads horizontally like coral fingering the sea. They say there’s no center here, but they’re wrong about that as well, for Emerson said a city lives by remembering, and if by remembering you mean a constant crop of citizens or the ability to lobby the hearts of any people, then the center of this city is its

remembering, and if by remembering you mean the chaptering and concentration of unrelated but adjacent segments, herein lies a constantly remembered center (Place, La Medusa 47)

Here, the city is presented as more than its physical or material parts. While it seems to have “no center,” the narrator explains that Los Angeles is centered by its ability to pull together “unrelated but adjacent segments” into a “remembered” or perhaps “imagined” center. Like the form of the book itself, the city is constructed from its fragmented or unrelated parts. The material and nonmaterial connect in the unification of these various parts of Los Angeles. In what appears to be another “[i]nterior” aside, the narrator identifies culture or nonmaterial elements that center even the centerless material space: “It’s a cluster-fuck, this coraled thing, a series of conjoined colonies, a city with no downtown. But as anyone can see, there are template nuclei and patterned knots of thought” (Place, La Medusa 78). The emergence of a pattern within the de-centered city is directly attributable to the textual space, where the material and nonmaterial are exposed.

What is perhaps even more compelling about reading La Medusa through the lens of unnatural ecopoetics, though, is that the textual space also grants the material and nonmaterial elements of the city agency. As the “coraled thing” that is the city is implicitly linked to recurring references to “threads of snakes” and a “rat’s nest” that displays “form without structure,”<sup>lix</sup> the book’s title character, Medusa, appears to stand in for the city itself (Place, La Medusa 77, 69). As such, the novel grants the city agency by expressing the material and nonmaterial elements that compose it through the perspectives of a variety of characters that embody the city’s diversity. In essence, the city speaks in the novel’s textual space, giving voice to the various elements that

compose it.

As the example of La Medusa demonstrates, unnatural eco-poetics provides a critical lens that recognizes the foregrounded textual space as a site where the material and nonmaterial elements of environmentality are expressed and made active. Non-traditional poems and extra-poetic texts like Grenier, Bök, Hammerlein, and Place are only a handful of examples of future directions for unnatural eco-poetics. As critics discover the eco-poetic sentiments that drive the textual and formal play of much contemporary art and writing, this new era of eco-poetic theory opens the door to analyzing a vast array of texts, in traditional poetic genres and extra-poetic contexts. Growing from the ecocritical push toward materiality and away from traditional ideas of nature, unnatural eco-poetics presents possibilities for a future of eco-poetics that lies beyond the genre of nature-oriented writing and outside the limited scope of environment as purely physical. Unnatural eco-poetics provides a bridge between ecocriticism's focus on physical environments and a broader interest in how the material and nonmaterial elements of environmental experience come together on the page.

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 Notes

## INTRODUCTION

<sup>i</sup> “A Step Away From Them” appears in Lunch Poems.

<sup>ii</sup> The speaker’s contemplation of death occurs later in the poem when he states: “First / Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock.” Brad Gooch comments in City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara (1993), that “A Step Away From Them” is the first poem O’Hara wrote after the death of these three famous friends and acquaintances, all of whom died within a short period of time (285-7). His reflections on death occur in relation to their physical demise but also through his consideration of death in relation to the physical environment around him. Later in the poem, he reflects on “the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, / which they’ll soon tear down,” implying a connection between the physical death of people and the figurative death that occurs constantly within the city. The city is a place of change and adaptation, something always responding to its surroundings. By connecting the physical and the figurative conceptions of death in these later lines, the poet reveals that the unnatural environment of the city is deeply in tune with life, both human and natural.

<sup>iii</sup> In How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (1998), Haraway introduces the term “Naturecultures.” She explains the term as “the implosions of the discursive realms of nature and culture” (Haraway 105).

<sup>iv</sup> In Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places (1996), Edward W. Soja outlines the ideas of “firstspace,” which is purely material, and “secondspace,” which positions “the idealist versus the materialist, the subjective versus the objective interpretation” (75, 78). In response to these, Soja outlines the concept of “thirdspace,” where subjective and objective experience, “structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious” all come together (56-7).

<sup>v</sup> O’Hara introduces this term in his poem, “Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun),” when he writes: “I make / myself a bourbon and commence / to write one of my “I do this I do that” / poems” (O’Hara, Collected 341).

<sup>vi</sup> Reverdy is an early twentieth-century poet who is closely associated with cubist and surrealist artistic movements.

<sup>vii</sup> In City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara (1993), Brad Gooch writes, that the poem “follows O’Hara in handheld camera fashion, wearing his trademark seersucker Brooks Brothers jacket with a volume of poems by Pierre Reverdy stuck in its pocket, as he heads on his lunch hour west and then downtown from the Museum, past construction sites on Sixth Avenue, through Times Square where he stops for a cheeseburger and a glass of papaya juice beneath the Chesterfield billboard with blowing smoke, and then back uptown to work. In the writing of the poem O’Hara left a record for history of the sensations of a sensitive and sophisticated man in the middle of the twentieth century walking through what was considered by some the capital of the globe” (288).

<sup>viii</sup> In The Future of Environmental Criticism (2005), Buell proposes that critics move away from conceptions of environment as separate from human culture and instead

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“think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text—to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces, and at several stages: in the composition, the embodiment, and the reception” (25).

<sup>ix</sup> I use the word ecological as it is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: “Of, relating to, or involving the interrelationships between living organisms and their environment.”

<sup>x</sup> Morton’s theory of “ambient poetics” rightly prompts ecocritics to acknowledge the mediated reality of language and accounts for the artificiality of writing’s medium by recognizing the page itself. However, for Morton, ambient poetics is fleeting and can only exist for a passing moment (Morton 50-51). Unnatural ecopoetics, while growing from his ideas, differs significantly from Morton’s “ambient poetics” because it identifies the environmentality at the core of contemporary poems, which does not diminish with the moment, but presents a new framework for textual expression of environmental experience that is fully imbued with culture, subjectivity, and physical reality simultaneously.

<sup>xi</sup> Nature poetry involves a kind of Romantic engagement with the natural world. In The Ecopoetry Anthology Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street explain that nature poetry is “shaped by romanticism and American transcendentalism, if often mediates on an encounter between the human subject and something in the other-than-human world that reveals an aspect of the meaning of life. But not all nature poetry is environmental or ecological poetry, and not all nature poetry evinces the accurate and unsentimental awareness of the natural world that is a sine qua non of ecopoetry” (xxviii).

<sup>xii</sup> The disparity in existing definitions is apparent in early landmark texts on ecopoetics. Leonard Scigaj, for instance, explains in Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets (1999) that ecopoets “record moments of nondualistic inhabitation in specific places where the experience occurs only when the noise of human ratiocination, including the fabrications of language, has been silenced” (8). In short, Scigaj views ecopoetics as a recording of oneness between a human and a specific place in nature, in which reason, language, thought, and even self are “silenced.” In this sense, Scigaj envisions the ecopoem as a place in which a pure moment in nature is preserved. J. Scott Bryson, on the other hand, views ecopoetics as overtly political. In Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction (2002), he argues that ecopoetics involves “an intense skepticism concerning hyperrationality, a skepticism that usually leads to an indictment of an overtechnologized world and a warning concerning the very real potential for ecological catastrophe” (Bryson 5-6). While Scigaj argues that ecopoetics is primarily about expressing a pure experience, Bryson contends that it is a mode of activism.

<sup>xiii</sup> Although ecopoetics is predominantly American, there are non-American iterations of the term. The most prominent of these is Nirmal Selvamony’s concept of “oikopoetics.” In “Oikopoetics and Tamil Poetry” (2011), he explains that his term acknowledges how cultural factors shape one’s relationship to nature and thus how that environment is expressed in language. In this paper, I have chosen not to include this definition or ideas from other parts of the world because concepts like Selvamony’s have remained confined to the Indian context and have yet to be applied to poetry outside of India and certainly have not been applied to American poetry.



<sup>xiv</sup> Lawrence Buell describes the first two waves of ecocriticism in The Future of Environmental Criticism. He writes, “For first-wave ecocriticism, ‘environment’ effectively meant ‘natural environment’ . . . Second-wave ecocriticism has tended to question organicist models of conceiving both environment and environmentalism” (Buell 21-2). The second wave brought with it a new interest in urban space, a movement away from pure wilderness, and a recognition of the role that human beings play in environments. In 2010, Scott Slovic and Joni Adamson identify what they call a third wave in ecocriticism, which is increasingly interested in international approaches and begins to consider the interrelatedness of nature and culture. Slovic takes up this argument in more depth in “The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline.” In 2012, Slovic further proposes the continued evolution of the field when he presents the concept of a fourth-wave ecocriticism. He writes: “It now seems to me, as we near the end of 2012, that the material turn in ecocriticism is broadening to the extent that it may well represent a new ‘fourth wave of ecocriticism’” (Slovic, “Editor’s Note” 619).

<sup>xv</sup> In “Ecopoetics: Drawing on Calfskin Vellum,” Jane Sprague insightfully points out one of the tensions of changing eco-poetic theory when she writes, “I hope to challenge and likewise complicate / critique ideas of eco-poetics as a genre. I resist eco-poetics. And definitions of eco-poetics” (1). Sprague’s resistance to definitions of eco-poetics is typical but it is important to note that it also exacerbates disjunction in conceptions of the term. Without a theoretically-rooted methodology, eco-poetics remains so malleable that it is difficult to positively identify. Eco-poetics’s resistance to theory, in fact, is reminiscent of ecocriticism’s own distaste for theory in its early days but were overturned by a need for universal methodology.

<sup>xvi</sup> Iijima’s collection demonstrates the disconnection between early conceptions of eco-poetics and the goals of contemporary writers. Namely, the book reveals that while early eco-poetic ideas assume that the world can be viewed objectively and thus represented mimetically, more recent conceptions of the field assume that the world is always experienced subjectively and embraces that subjectivity. In Iijima’s collection, several contributors examine anti-mimetic forms and unnatural environments.

<sup>xvii</sup> Similarly, in “‘Sprung from American Soil’: The ‘Nature’ of Africa in the Poetry of Helene Johnson” (2009), Katherine Lynes insists on the field’s acknowledgment of human life alongside nature when she observes that “[e]cocritical definitions of eco-poetics usually involve advocacy for nature. I concur with this quite logical aim, but I would also argue that there are times when ecocritics should also consider that the focus of eco-poetics is the advocacy for the human subject” (525). Although here Lynes calls for eco-poetics to engage with the “human subject” as well as “nature,” this move is representative of the larger shift toward acknowledging natural and cultural environments that is taking place not only in eco-poetics but also throughout ecocritical studies.

<sup>xviii</sup> Iovino and Oppermann lay out the aims of material ecocriticism when they write, “Whereas the interpreters of the ‘linguistic turn’ stressed the social constructedness (in other words, the artificiality) of discursive practices connected, for example, to the definition of race, class, gender, etc., the ‘new materialists’ propose an approach that goes

beyond the dichotomy between matter and meaning: discursive practices ‘intra-act’ and are co-extensive with material processes in the many ways the world “articulates” itself” (“Diptych” 453-4).

<sup>xix</sup> Language poets are, as explained by Stephen Fredman in Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse (1983), “originally critical, practicing a vigilant self-awareness that calls forth language and subjects it to an examination of its mediatory function” (136-7). Language poetry views language as a construction and demands that readers work to attain meaning from the text.

<sup>xx</sup> Language poetry’s unique concern for self-awareness alongside its particular cognizance of language’s limitations is directly translated into conceptions of a new ecopoetics. Such connections are apparent in Marcella Durand’s identification of the prominent role of language in ecopoetics. In “The Ecology of Poetry,” she claims that “Experimental ecological poets are concerned with the links between words and sentences, stanzas, paragraphs, and how these systems link with energy and matter—that is, the exterior world” (Duran 62).

<sup>xxi</sup> Nature’s agency is a direct result of theories of material ecocriticism. In Material Ecocriticism, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann contend, “Seeking to provide a more accurate (and also more ontologically generous) picture of reality, the new materialists argue for a ‘theory of distributive agency,’ through which actions in the world are not caused by “a human subject—posited in isolation from the nonhuman—but a material-semiotic network of human and nonhuman agents incessantly generating the world’s embodiments and events” (3).

<sup>xxii</sup> The chapters work chronologically from Ammons’s “Corsons Inlet” (1965), rather than Garbage (1993), which was actually published after the first publication of Hejinian’s My Life in 1987. However, Hejinian’s book was re-released several times, leaving some flexibility in dating it. Since Ammons is often associated with mid-twentieth century poetics rather than the language poetry movement of the late 1960s and early 70s with which Hejinian is often associated, I place his work both conceptually and chronologically earlier than Hejinian’s.

<sup>xxiii</sup> “Corsons Inlet” is often understood for its mimetic form and content. In John Elder’s well-known essay on the poem, he observes that the text’s formal structure is intended to mimic the ebbs and flows of the shoreline on the page, both through variable line length and punctuation (146).

<sup>xxiv</sup> My argument here extends previous recognitions of naturalcultural intersections in Garbage. In “Wallace Stevens and A.R. Ammons as Men on the Dump,” Gyorgyi Voros begins to consider the general role of waste in Garbage, arguing that it serves both Stevens and Ammons as an equalizing space where high and low, nature and culture, human and non-human intermingle. She argues that “the dump disposes of hierarchy, among other things, even to the extent of including nature’s waste along with that of human, cultural waste” (Voros 163). In other words, the poet’s selection of the dump conflates the human and the natural worlds. No longer separated by hierarchies, within the trash heap everything is intertwined.

<sup>xxv</sup> However, Howe’s poem is typically read, as by Marjorie Perloff, as a “an elegy for the poet’s mother, the Irish actress and playwright Mary Manning” and as a

poem interested in “refracting history and language” (Howe, Back Cover). Although these readings highlight some important projects of The Midnight, they fail to recognize how the poem’s integration of history, experimentation with language and radical new forms, and infusion of culture is tied to concepts of ecopoetics that seek to foreground the ways in which lived experience in the physical world are always tied to personal memories, history, mental wandering, and the limitations of the senses.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Conceptual poetry appropriates found text to create a new poem and generally is concerned with the concept of its creation rather than the product itself. Goldsmith outlines conceptual poetry in Uncreative Writing.

## CHAPTER 1

<sup>xxvii</sup> The poet outlines the location of the trash heap in the poem by clarifying “down by I-95 in / Florida” the “garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance, / as if up ziggurats toward the high places gulls / and garbage keep alive” (Ammons, G 18).

<sup>xxviii</sup> The view of garbage as a site for rejuvenation and blending is represented in recent ecocritical scholarship on waste. In “Languages of Waste: Matter and Form in our Garb-age,” Véronique Bragard contends that “manufactured waste [is a] substance that threatens but also interconnects” (462). Susan Signe Morrison similarly argues for the positive power of garbage in “Waste Aesthetics: Form as Restitution.”

<sup>xxix</sup> In his analysis of Plunder, Bloom observes that “Nature proclaims the poet’s mind as its despoiler, and Ammons, despite his pride, manifests anxiety as to the dictation involved. Yet whatever kind of a poem we want to call this, it is no version of pastoral, for implicitly the poet tells us that nature was never his home” (198). To some extent, this reading parallels Bonnie Costello’s reading, in which she contends that nature serves as a tool for the poet’s own revelations.

<sup>xxx</sup> In Stevens’s early poem, the speaker explains that “One must have a mind of winter . . . not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind” (Stevens 8, ll. 1, 7-8). In this sense, only one who has the same mentality as the natural environment is able to avoid distorted perceptions of nature. He who is without the “mind of winter,” on the other hand, is inevitably going to add his or her emotions (“misery”) to the sounds of the impartial landscape. The speaker continues to explain that only he who is “nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (Stevens 8, ll. 14-15). For the human, to be able to see “nothing” would require the perceiver to abandon his or her ideals and view the landscape objectively—thus becoming “nothing himself.”

<sup>xxxi</sup> In Williams’s Paterson, when a flood is introduced into the text, the poem and the imagined poetic landscape are thoroughly deconstructed—Williams even projects this disorientation into the form of the poem. In this section, the flood has destroyed everything; yet, the flood forces the speaker “to begin to find a shape—to begin to begin again” (Williams 140). The flood, then, is a force of renewal, forcing the poem to move forward to create something fresh from the destruction. Considered in relation to the trash heap in Garbage, the destruction that occurs in Williams’s flood, like the decomposition of the dump, reduces language to its base in order to allow reformulation and renewal.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Vendler’s argument that Ammons’s poetics is an attempt to inspire real-world action closely aligns her argument with the principles of traditional ecopoetics. In

Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction, J. Scott Bryson specifically identifies one of the central characteristics of ecopoetry as a warning of the impending risk lurking in human actions (5-6). Here, Vendler appears to identify such a trait in Ammons's poem.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Conceptions of traditional ecopoetics emerge primarily from early texts by Scigaj, Bate, and Bryson. Although some scholars have begun to problematize understandings of ecopoetics as expressions of nature, those traditional understandings remain prevalent in notions of the term.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Scott Knickerbocker's Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language, which I would identify as a step toward a theory of unnatural ecopoetics, contends that this new version of ecopoetics must embrace its own artifice and even foreground its own limitations to contend with the challenges presented by postmodern theories that problematize mimesis (2).

## CHAPTER 2

<sup>xxxv</sup> The essay was published in Hejinian's collection of essays, The Language of Inquiry, in 2000 but grew out of a version published in Bob Perelman's Writing/Talks in 1985. A version of the essay was also given as a talk in 1983 (Hejinian, Language of Inquiry 40).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Hejinian writes, "A central activity of poetic language is formal. In being formal, in making form distinct, it opens--makes variousness and multiplicity and possibility articulate and clear" (Language of Inquiry 56). Her concept of multiplicity of experience is central to unnatural ecopoetics.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> My Life was originally published in 1980 and a longer version appeared in 1987. Additionally, the poet released an updated and even longer version entitled My Life in the Nineties in 2003.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> In "Language Poetry and Collective Life," Oren Izenberg explains that language poetry was "conceived as a response to two roughly contemporaneous if incommensurable developments—the American government's involvement in the Vietnam War and the American university's enthusiastic reception of continental literary theory" (132). Similarly, Reinfeld writes that "[l]anguage poets operate as both politically and philosophically oriented intellectuals" (3).

<sup>xxxix</sup> See Rasula's book This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry (2002). In a sense, Rasula links, albeit loosely, his early discussion of language writing with ecopoetics when he writes that "[p]oetry is this strangely familiar realm of estrangements, its uncanniness preternaturally arousing a maximum alertness, but an alertness achieved paradoxically, by dissolving the resources of intellection and identity" (This Compost 8). Still considering the disorientation of the poem, a disjunction arguably rooted in language writing, he contends that such poetic approaches allow the individual to distance him or herself from the imposition of logic that might skew the material object or experience.

<sup>xl</sup> This article is co-written by Oppermann and Serenella Iovino but the passage quoted here comes from a section written exclusively by Oppermann.

<sup>xli</sup> The term "intra-action" is taken from Karen Barad's Meeting the Universe Halfway (2007), in which she explains that "'intra-action' signifies the mutual

constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (33).

<sup>xlii</sup> See Hejinian’s essay, “The Rejection of Closure” in The Language of Inquiry for a complete discussion of her concept of the open text.

<sup>xliii</sup> In this chapter, I will be working with the 1987 edition because it is the most widely referenced and read version of the text.

<sup>xliv</sup> There are a large number of repeated phrases throughout the book aside from the one discussed at length in this chapter, which range from references to those who “love to be astonished” to observations that “it is hard to turn away from moving water” to claims that “the obvious analogy is with music.”

<sup>xlv</sup> The poet’s struggle with the ways in which human logic alters original events is apparent throughout the book but perhaps most prominently displayed in her consideration of the standard calendar in relation to the “Mayan calendar,” which “has more days” (Hejinian, My Life 55). In this scene, the speaker documents the artificiality of logical structures such as time by highlighting their breakdown as a result of the simple act of turning to an alternative epistemological structure, such as the “Mayan calendar.” In doing so, the speaker implies that logical systems, which seem incontrovertible, are easily destabilized.

### CHAPTER 3

<sup>xlvi</sup> As I will discuss in the coming pages, Howe’s poem “Thorow” has received some critical attention for its connection to landscape.

<sup>xlvii</sup> In her interview with Keller, Howe specifically discusses why she objects to being identified as a language poet (19-20). Allen identifies her as a language poet but others, like Linda Reinfeld contend that critics should be cautious about associating Howe with her contemporary poets.

### CHAPTER 4

<sup>xlviii</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the history of appropriation in poetry, see Perloff’s Unoriginal Genius: Poetry By Other Means in The New Century. In the book’s introduction, she nicely relates contemporary appropriation poetry back to modernist traditions.

<sup>xlix</sup> Although Kosuth’s book was published in 2000, he began writing it in 1966. As Dworkin and Goldsmith point out, “Kosuth directly applied concepts common during the 1960s heyday of conceptual art to writing, thus setting a precedent for conceptual writing strategies” (331).

<sup>1</sup> The critique of culture is apparent in some works of appropriation, especially in the art world. Artists like Duchamp and Warhol certainly aim to critique the culture industry from which they emerge, but many appropriation poets, such as Goldsmith, Howe, and others, use appropriation to foreground the boundaries, complexities, and multiplicities of language.

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<sup>li</sup> I would argue, however, that there are many more levels of space at work in the book. Other spaces that shape how humans conceive and understand events, like the historical space and perhaps subjective mental space could also be considered.

<sup>lii</sup> “Devastation” comes from the Baltimore Sun. “Terrifying” is the headline for the Oakland Tribune. “Terror” appears as the headline for a wide variety of newspapers including the Arizona Republic, The Advocate, and The Seattle Times. “Unthinkable” appears as the headline for The Salt Lake City Tribune.

<sup>liii</sup> Although I focus on Place’s novel, La Medusa, it is important to note that she straddles the line between poetry and prose and is well known for her poetry. Her work includes the Tragodía trilogy, Dies: A Sentence (2005), and Boycott (2013).

## CONCLUSION

<sup>liv</sup> Further examples and commentary on Patrick Hammerlein’s work can be found on his blog at <http://rural1028.blogspot.com/>

<sup>lv</sup> Grenier provides a “translation” of some of his poetry in "Drawing Poems/Rough' Translations."

<sup>lvi</sup> For more information, visit [www.foundpoetryreview.com](http://www.foundpoetryreview.com).

<sup>lvii</sup> A few of these iterations do not include a diagram of the brain, but only a photo.

<sup>lviii</sup> There are constant references to locations within the Los Angeles area, the most prominent of which is Beverly Hills, but there are also specific references to a variety of sites including Forest Lawn, La Brea Tar Pits, Los Angeles County Art Museum, Peterson Automotive Museum, the Grapevine, the UCLA Bruins, Wilshire Boulevard, and many others (Place, La Medusa 88, 211-3).

<sup>lix</sup> Throughout the book, the concept of the rat’s nest recurs in relation to the brain and in reference to chaos, as in Dr. Casper Bowles’s surgical removal of “a rat’s nest of a tumor” (Place, La Medusa 69). As the rat’s nest is linked to the brain through Casper, the further conflation of the brain with “snakes” implies a connection between the confusion of the rat’s nest, the image of entangled snakes, and the myth of Medusa as a figure cursed with a head of vicious snakes.

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