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BROKEN DOZER, HAUNTED VALE: THE ECOPOETICS OF AMBIENT LANGUAGE

Andrew Merecicky
University of Rhode Island, a.merecicky@gmail.com

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BROKEN DOZER, HAUNTED VALE:
THE ECOPOETICS OF AMBIENT LANGUAGE

BY
ANDREW MERECICKY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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IN
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UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

2022

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

ANDREW MERECICKY

APPROVED:

Dissertation Committee:

Major Professor Peter Covino

Travis Williams

Susana de los Heros

Brenton DeBoef
DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND
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ABSTRACT

Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale is a collection of poetry that explores the principles of ambient language poetics as articulated in its critical introduction. Rather than a poetics focused on a set of thematic concerns, ambient language poetics is an ecopoetic that addresses the writing process itself and proposes an alternative to the internal/external spatial metaphor that inspires creative writing pedagogy premised on the urgency of self-expression. The poems within the collection are an experimental inquiry into what might be possible in making poems if the activity of reading/writing is not motivated primarily by representational and mimetic aims that are described by the literary critic and philosopher Timothy Morton in his concept of “ecomimesis,” or, in other words, the range of techniques writers use to attempt to render in language environments as legible, inhabitable places. Drawing examples from popular music (including Brian Eno, Bon Iver, and the genre of vaporwave) as well as the avant-garde, conceptual work of poet Tan Lin, the critical introduction outlines the dangers inherent in the idea of the poet as truth-teller, whose main goal is to create for a reader a sense of clarity and coherency in an unjust, chaotic world. Ambient language poetics aims to bring the critical concern of the intentional fallacy into the activity of creative composition itself to ask what it may mean to write and teach a literature that begins not with the imperative to speak of what is most in need of artistic articulation, but rather an experience of ambient entanglement with language. Neither purely acquired from external sources, nor merely a tool with which to express internal ideas and sentiments, language is treated in *Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale* as an ambient continuum out of which poetry takes shape.

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To Michelle Caraccia, thank you for helping guide this anxious poet through everything administrative and bureaucratic. Even more so, I want to thank you for being a

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I'd like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my Grandma Jean, who told me when I was younger that I was going to be a professor someday. I laughed then, but now, I think about how clearly she saw me and knew my path before I did.

Finally, to my wife Mollie, the love of my life. It's pointless to even attempt to articulate what you mean to me or how much you've contributed to and shaped this project. You've been there for me every step of the way. I have learned and continue to learn so much from you every day. Those who know us best will know that I wrote this for you, and that it is ours forever.

PREFACE

This dissertation has been prepared using manuscript formatting.

“Quantum Fruit for a Belle.” A version of this poem has been published as Mecericky, Andrew. “Quantum Fruit for a Belle.” *Word For/Word*, no. 35, 2020, <http://www.wordforword.info/vol35/Mecericky2.html>.

“The Low Dead Cry Out or Save Me a Seat I’ll Be There in 5, OMW!” A version of this poem has been published as Mecericky, Andrew. “The Low Dead Cry Out or Save Me a Seat I’ll Be There in 5, OMW!” *Word For/Word*, no. 35, 2020, <http://www.wordforword.info/vol35/Mecericky3.html>.

“Weather Balloon Playlist 1.” A version of this poem has been published as Mecericky, Andrew. “Weather Balloon Playlist 1.” *Word For/Word*, no. 35. 2020, <http://www.wordforword.info/vol35/Mecericky4.html>.

“So.” A version of this poem has been published as Mecericky, Andrew. “So.” *Euphemism*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2020, <https://english.illinoisstate.edu/euphemism/15-2/poetry/so/>.

“Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale.” A version of this poem has been published as Mecericky, Andrew. “Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale.” *Word For/Word*, no. 35, 2020, <http://www.wordforword.info/vol35/Mecericky.html>.

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PART ONE: The Ecopoetics of Ambient Language

*Truss in dental
Pop Oly Ruby
Tobby Tun w d l
l x t s 8 7 r e r (*
—Jack Kerouac, “142nd Chorus,”
Mexico City Blues

*. . . this heterogeneousness to signification operates through, despite, and in excess of it
and produces in poetic language 'musical' but also nonsense effects that destroy not only
accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that
guarantee of thetic consciousness (of the signified object and ego).*

—Julia Kristeva,
Desire in Language

Introduction

The most fitting place to introduce ambient language poetics is the only place it can begin, that is, where one seems to be. As I write, I am in my study where there is a large collection of Beat poetry, a combination of the collections of works accumulated over the years by my wife and myself. The text I’m most drawn to from this incomplete collection carrying the moniker “Beat” is Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues*. Why I keep returning to this text year after year, pulling it off the shelf, reading some lines aloud to myself, is overdetermined. The words take on a material, bodily texture as I say them; they almost seem to have what wine drinkers call “mouthfeel.” The rhythm of the lines, which I can barely read, builds to an irresistible urge to get up and pace around as I pronounce the lines to hear the music, and I do hear it. There is, undeniably, an aesthetic attachment, but there is also an attachment as a matter of first exposure. Kerouac was one of the first poets I read that seemed to call for a different kind of attention, one that, perhaps, had little to do with the close-reading and explicative exercises I had, up until

then, been taught were the primary way to read and experience a poem. There was no framework I had been able to apply to reading this kind of poetry, no way I had of accounting for it at the time. Surely there is also an attachment to the poem via Kerouac's biography, one with which I felt an identification in terms of his restless, white-but-also-immigrant, working class origins. I found Kerouac around the same time many of my friends were hitting the Road to leave the flat brown of western Ohio for the West, and their surprise to find that quite a bit of it still remained, though, as for Kerouac, it had little of what they were looking for. Or maybe I'm drawn back because I share an appreciation for this work with some of the people I care for most in my life, and it reminds me of those relationships.

One of the most significant attachments I have to these 242 "choruses" is that after years of reading, they still feel impenetrable, as if written in a private shorthand no one but Kerouac (and perhaps not even he) could fully read. This attachment isn't like that of a puzzle solver or of a spiritual seeker expecting resolution or enlightenment, because I notice that I'm not really interested in reading it for whatever Kerouac may or may not have intended to say in these lines. Though I've read it many times, the only thing that feels familiar about it is its very strangeness. *Mexico City Blues* is a poetry as deeply personal and human as any of the confessional lyrics that would emerge in the decades after its publication. At the same time, it is alien and alienating, obfuscated, and reckless. I can't think of any other poetic work quite like it in Kerouac's oeuvre or among his contemporaries.

In *Hooked: Art and Attachment*, Rita Felski takes up the task of describing the dispersed, soft-determination of our attachment to art both as critical and "lay audiences"

(xii). Taking her cues from Bruno Latour's work, in particular his critical methodology actor-network theory (ANT), Felski explores the multiple vectors of agencies or "actants" that bring the beholder of art not just into relationship with the work of art, but into potent, though not necessarily permanent, attachment. The three types of attachment she explores in her book are "attunement," "identification," and "interpretation," but for the purposes of illuminating ambient language poetics we need only look at the first type.

Attunement, Felski explains, is "not primarily an issue of representation, of the 'aboutness' of the work of art, but its presence, in a sense that will need to be clarified" (41). Such clarification, she says, might result from "the fuzzy word clouds of phenomenology—its language of attunement and affinity, mood and world" that "can be blended with the empirical, thing oriented, trail-sniffing emphases of actor-network theory" (Felski 44). Attunement has little to do with the content or rhetorical messaging of a work of art and is related to a pre-rational mode of attachment to art that is nevertheless shaped by "pressures of class and culture," to name but two types of influences (Felski 47). Attunement could also be thought of as a psychological capacity to be affected by a particular work of art. The clarifying critical work that tries to account for the nebulous, affective qualities of art by blending the "fuzzy" and the "empirical," Felski claims, has largely been absent from literary studies because of an over-emphasis on close reading. And she credits this emphasis on close reading to the uncritical position that the emotion and seductive pull of "the literary work itself, even the great work" is antithetical to criticism (126). Central to Felski's argument is that there is no need to deny the value of close reading as critical methodology in order to also recognize that it does not constitute a large part of most readers' attachments to language art. Likewise, the

literary critic should not suppress the personal and felt attachments they have to the works they write about as though such attachments were hindrances apart from critical thought. Fortunately, this mode of critical work is not as unprecedented as Felski's clarion call for a new kind of literary criticism might imply. In the realm of poetics, particularly when poets write about or to other poets, I believe we can see just such an attached critique.

Clark Coolidge, a poet associated with the New York School and Language movement, provides an excellent example of the kind of critical discussion Felski details. Coolidge writes in his essay "Kerouac," first printed in *American Poetry Review* in 1995, that Kerouac wrote a sound-first poetry, drawing on Jazz. Coolidge himself a Jazz musician and aficionado, makes his attachments to Kerouac's self-described "Bop Prosody" seem obvious. His essay is an homage to Kerouac's powerful and direct influence and also a clinical close reading of Kerouac's aesthetics and writing process. Coolidge writes that understanding Kerouac's peculiar way of being in language, his approach or disposition toward poetry is the key to receiving his work. Coolidge is helping readers "tune in" to this disposition, which, again, has little to do with the content or rhetorical messaging that Felski asks us to de-emphasize. Felski's description of moods as "modes of existence that form and inform relations to the world" (76) are easy to remember when Coolidge describes the "momentum" of Kerouac's lines, writing, "I almost get a mystical feeling that if you can get to a sort of momentum that works in waves, rhythmic waves, you can pick up things that you might not otherwise even sense." This "momentum" should be our first mooring to ambient language poetics, which provides some framework to account for poetic techniques (for the critic/reader) and (for

the poet) it evokes an approach to composition that (in)forms the making of poetry. This mode of existing in writing poetry (poetic) is fleeting and requires something like Coolidge's momentum, on the writerly side of the work, combined with Felski's "attunement" in the reader's situation. There will be more to say about why we might want to further tack on the prefix "eco-" to this poetic later, but first, we must consider how Kerouac's process can be carried over to my concept of ambient language.

In order to give us an image of where Kerouac's language seemed to come from and of the activity of its generation from the perspective of its fleshy conduit, Coolidge quotes another poet of the Beat cohort, Philip Whalen. In an interview, Whalen describes watching Kerouac as he writes, saying, "He'd laugh and say, Look at this! And he'd type and he'd laugh. Then he'd make a mistake, and this would lead him off into a possible part of a new paragraph, into a funny riff of some kind that he'd add while he was in the process of copying" (Coolidge). Here, Kerouac the poet sounds more like the first reader of the poem than its progenitor. He laughs in a kind of self-surprise. This laughter, Whalen suggests, arises as Kerouac is typing up his handwritten notebooks "faster than any human being you ever saw" (Coolidge). Only after Whalen marks Kerouac's laughter twice does he note the inevitable mistake and Kerouac's awareness of it, which opens the possibility of "riffing" on a typo before returning to copying again from his notebooks. The crux of Coolidge's association between Kerouac and Jazz, is not only that Kerouac's work had a musical quality to it that arguably re-presented and reproduced Jazz rhythms, but that the creative possibility of improvisation, the acceptance of the typographical error or the misplaced note into the artwork was shared with Jazz. Nor is Coolidge's

description of this poetics limited to stylistics or techniques; it is also compositional animus.

Kerouac's poetry raises a number of challenges for anyone who might hold the idea that poetry is inherently an artform of precision and carefully crafted metaphor or that it is the genre to be relied on when our own overwhelming and confusing emotions lead us on a search for the right words to make sense of a most nonsensical world. What is it about error that, if one is open to its inevitability and agency (the potential to make a difference in the Latourian sense), can feel inspirational? How often is such inspiration willfully or reflexively edited out of one's creative activity if one lacks the kind of playful attitude exhibited in Whalen's portrait of Kerouac in action? If the emphasis is to reign over language and bend it to the will of the poet, what room is there for error's inspiration? And if Kerouac writes in this mode, so open to the creative possibilities of something as human as the typo, to what extent can such premeditated attunement not be said to account for something approaching intention? These are some questions for both the creative writer and the critic whose sun rises and sets with close-reading, or, at least, who is unsure of how to speak of much else. What is left of close reading that doesn't parse neatly but is shot through with unintentional mistakes? Simply identifying error or noting that it may have resulted in, say, an accidental pun that the poet decided to preserve, doesn't feel illuminating enough to qualify as close reading and therefore may be left out or glossed over in the critical accounting of a poem.

When the adept close reader struggles to sustain even the self-aware rhetorical supposition of authorial intent as a critical methodology, they might feel uncomfortable giving a reading at all, or it may, at least, lead them to wonder about the purpose of doing

so. Instead, the critic may treat parts of the text as something beyond the scope of critical analysis. Why should one perform a close reading of a poem generated by a computer algorithm, for example, if all the discussion can ultimately produce is idle chatter, and this due to the unshakeable knowledge that no conscious mind is behind the text in question? Shouldn't the qualified critic be more interested in close reading the algorithm that generated the poem text, its rules and the bank of the language from which the generating algorithm is directed to draw, since any implications the text could possibly have reside at the point of intentional design? Surely, this kind of critic thinks, we may not be able to speak about the poems generated by the algorithm in a given theoretical frame, but if we knew which dictionaries the programmer-poet included and which syntactical rules were defined, we just might be able to achieve such a reading; we might just be able to make this aleatoric text mean something after all. Indeed, frameworks of meaning are harder to come by when looking at things with an a priori assumption that they are random or anomalous.

Here is where actor-network theory might relieve some of the pressure on the critic who feels pressure to skip straight to the element of most authorial design. By way of example, Latour presents a dialog in which a professor explains actor-network theory to a student interlocutor as a negative theory because it engages with what we cannot say about the shape of the objects the critic or researcher attempts to describe (142). The continually baffling point for the hypothetical student in Latour's dialog is the professor's insistence that actor-network theory is not applicable to or useful for developing a framework of understanding that accounts for a certain arrangement of objects (actants) in a given network of relations. The student is looking for actor-network theory to help

them produce a theory or identify a pattern. Latour's student gets frustrated with their hypothetical professor: "But I have lots of descriptions already! I'm drowning in them. That's just my problem. That's why I'm lost and that's why I thought it would be useful to come to you. Can't ANT help me with this mass of data? I need a framework!" (146). In response, the professor repeats the main tenet of actor-network theory, that one should look at "the actors themselves" (and each of their own related frameworks, theories, contexts that may make a difference), which can only lead to more descriptions and more actors (147).

One sees in Latour's actor-network theory a "rejection of closure" akin to the poetics of Lyn Hejinian in the 1980s when she was closely affiliated with the Language movement. A "closed" text, for Hejinian was one that had a singular or compelling interpretation that presented itself as a universal truth. Ambient language poetics draws on the tradition of Language poetry but, as will be shown in the course of this essay, shares little of its dogmatic resistance to what Hejinian called "the coercive, epiphanic mode in contemporary lyric poetry." For now, let it suffice to mark the kindred spirit of ANT and Language poetry insofar as they both resist paraphrase, summary, and reductive interpretation as predecessors to ambient language poetics.

If the close reader/critic can likewise give up the same kind of insistence that Latour's student places on arriving at some theoretical claim anticipated in the activity of close reading itself, the need to distinguish between intentional and unintentional elements in a text is, if not moot, certainly less central to critical activity. The critic might find that they have plenty to say about the text of the algorithm-generated poem or the aleatoric poem if they limit their close readings to descriptions and stop shy of building a

hermeneutic “reading.” Free of this limitation, the reader will have an easier time reading and addressing the ambient language poetics it is my aim to elucidate.

From Babble Flow to Ambient Language

The most salient and useful concept from “Kerouac”—the dinghy from Coolidge’s essay that brings us to the shores of ambient language poetics—is his notion of “Babble Flow.” The concept rhymes with the idea of baby talk, and for good reason. The so-called “non-sense” syllables spoken to infants is part of the human language acquisition process. Our first encounters with language underscores that it is ambient. Before much is distinguishable in our infant minds, we acquire (receive from elsewhere rather than biologically produce) a language system. Baby talk primes our young brains to identify and distinguish the sounds, syllables, and phonemes that make up our parent/caretaker’s language, so that we can, eventually, make use of language to communicate our needs and desires to others. And, again, this process of acquisition is only possible because language is ambient.

In ambient language poetics, “ambient” refers to this fundamental description of how we relate to language. To say language is ambient does not imply that language belongs to the background in a figure/ground binary, nor does it mean moods/atmospheres/tones are of especial import, and we will return to this point when we look at the affinities ambient language poetics has with the genre of ambient music. The binary foreground/background is a spatial metaphor that can knock us adrift. Even foregrounded language—language that draws attention to itself as language—is ambient. Likewise, the binary of internal/external is problematic for the concept of ambient language. Though all language must pass through some process of acquisition or

invention for us to make use of it in writing, the notion that language is “out there” rather than originating “in one’s mind” doesn’t clarify much. If a spatial metaphor is needed for the time being, let it be that of the jellyfish and the ocean. If one were asked if the jellyfish in its natural habitat is internal or external to the sea, the only sensible answer is “both.”¹ And this kind of nonparadox is what Coolidge’s notion of Babble Flow is pointing to in poetry as well.

Coolidge describes Babble Flow in Kerouac’s work as, “Pressure off words so they pile and collide in and he hears them in mind as if spoken by another.” Disinhibition might be another way to say “pressure off words.” Where some stream-of-conscious exercises usually try to circumvent the rational, editing mind altogether, the disinhibition of Babble Flow is measured if not calculating. After all, Kerouac worked from his notebooks and his memory of events. He may have pushed for improvisation in his “riffing,” but he wasn’t exactly free-associating or recording every thought. What does it mean to hear a word in one’s own mind as if spoken by another? Coolidge is not describing an auditory hallucination or a remembered quote, though the dissociation of the former and the citational nature intrinsic to the latter still swing through the orbit of Babble Flow. I would argue that Coolidge is describing how Kerouac treated language as something ambient, something he was swimming in rather than generating. “As if spoken by another,” is to say Kerouac let the language get ahead of the self, to let the sonic and conceptual rhythms of what he was writing, mistakes and all, cue him to the next compositional event.

¹ The OED includes the prefix *ambi-* in the etymology for “ambient,” which has been used to form nouns and adjectives with a sense of “both” or “both sides.” For example, the word “ambidextrous.”

In his essay, Coolidge shares from his own notebooks his attempts to describe Babble Flow as he recognized it in Kerouac's poetry: "Increasing density turns the mind-ear away from impulse or remembered image toward sound as material for the making." The density here is a result of disinhibition and an ability to hear the accumulation of sounds as the quick-thinking improvisational mind searches for the next word, beat, or note. The kind of "remembered" imagery frequently seen in free associative writing is deemphasized in this activity. Many other words and sounds surround (or are prepositionally ambient to) those that result from the artistic decisions Kerouac made. As we'll come to see, however, with ambient language poetics, this ability to hear the surrounding language need not be the result of lightning fast improvisational mind, as Coolidge believed Kerouac's to be.

Coolidge also connects his concept of Babble Flow directly to his contemporary Bernadette Mayer's work *Mind of Hour*, which he describes as Mayer's attempt to "capture/notate everything her mind possibly touched on in that one hour." Everything that one's mind touches on is another good start for describing ambient language minus the will to capture any of it. Mayer's ambitious attempt, both she and Coolidge had agreed, turned out to be impossible no matter what techniques Mayer deployed, including trying different types of hypnosis and inventing her own shorthand notation to speed up her ability to record her thoughts (Coolidge). Because language is ambient, this task is impossible. But more to the point, when writing poetry like Kerouac or Mayer, the disinhibited mind is not searching for the "right" words any more than a set of lungs are searching for the "right" breath of air. There are the words that are there in the moment of

writing and the words those words suggest, none of which are original to the poets' mind, but must be appropriated and repurposed from the sum of the poet's available language.

Jazz scat singing shares similar characteristics to this concept of available language, because it is limited to the singer's physiological ability to produce certain sounds and begins with the kind of sounds the singer has come in contact with, including, but not limited to, the timbre and voicings of the instruments in an accompanying musical ensemble. Kerouac clearly drew from scat singing influences (Coolidge provides numerous examples in his essay), but he also drew from his first language, Quebecois joul, as well as the language he problematically appropriates from indigenous Mexican culture, Buddhist writings, and just about anything else he was exposed to. Kerouac's inclination and ability to draw on his surroundings, his environment, is a major feature of his Babble Flow, and it portends the inclusivity of ambient language poetics.

Extending Babble Flow to his own work Coolidge writes, "I think poets all know the feeling of grabbing a word and you really don't know what the hell it means but you put it in and you know it's right, and you always find out somehow, or maybe you find a way of finding out it's right, but anyway it goes in and has to go in," which is another way to describe hearing words in one's mind "as if spoken by another." Such a hearing is only possible if language is ambient. Our conscious, compositional minds can pull up language that had been acquired unconsciously. Words can seem to press themselves upon us like intrusive thoughts, because language acts upon us as something *other than* (though not external to) us. Again, according to actor-network theory, language (and anything close to it that might fall short of qualifying, in an academic sense, as language)

must act on us if it is going to be included among actors that “make a difference” in a world of differences (Latour 71)—the necessary precondition to poetry.

The quote from Kerouac, which Coolidge uses as an illustration of this feeling of not knowing what a word means yet sensing that it’s the “right” word, comes from a 1961 article in *Escapade*: “in describing the stormy sea in *Desolation Angels* I heard the sound 'Peligroso' for 'Peligroso Roar' without knowing what it meant, wrote it down involuntarily, later found out it means 'dangerous' in Spanish” (Coolidge). This word, “peligroso,” is a sensible adjective to use to describe a roar, though it comes from a different lexicon than Kerouac’s first or second languages. Kerouac didn’t *know* the definition when he wrote it, rather he came to know it because he wrote it. The Spanish word “peligroso” also shares phonic resonance with “périlleux” from Kerouac’s first language, suggesting that Kerouac’s intuitions extend his available language—the scope of his semantic and sonic reach across languages—even further than Coolidge allows for in his analysis. I defy anyone who has made a sustained effort at writing poetry (or any other genre for that matter) to say that this is has never happened to them at some point, whether or not we choose to believe Kerouac’s anecdote.

As writers, our mastery of any vocabulary is never complete, but because language is ambient, one’s level of mastery need not be limiting. Conventional wisdom in professional and scholarly writing says never to use a word if you don’t know what it means lest you deploy it incorrectly, embarrassingly. Like Babble Flow, ambient language poetics acknowledges the convention in this aversion to unfamiliar vocabulary but not necessarily the wisdom.

Kerouac's explanation of his involuntary use of a term like 'peligroso' accords with ambient language poetics. This compositional phenomenon, whether impulsive or compulsive, occurs in several places in my collection *Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale*. In "Nexus Freight Erasure," for example, the first line borrows a so-called nonsense word² from Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." Here I've preserved the full phrase "manxome foe" (line 10) rather than treating Carroll's invented word as though its sense is separable as an adjective applied to "foe." The first line of my poem also pushes the phrase to accrue new associations that it might add new sense by its syntactical proximity to the word "time," rather than the titular imaginary creature. I don't see a significant difference between how Kerouac arrived at the word "peligroso" and Carroll's arrival at "manxome." The difference in terms of a compositional practice (hearing the word and so writing it down) is perhaps significant for the critic. Of course, "peligroso" is not a nonsense word, but to Kerouac the authorial decision results from his reaching into a kind of translingual liminal zone that pushes up against, but isn't reducible to, Carroll's engagement with so-called nonsense words. Kerouac may or may not have known the meaning of "peligroso," but his decision to trust where the sound was leading him deprioritizes (without ignoring) the denotative value of his diction. The risk Kerouac takes with his word choice is that rhetorical clarity may be impeded for the sake of an

² So-called nonsense because while the term "nonsense word" or "nonsense poem" has some currency within the critical literature and the OED itself to describe language that is difficult if not impossible to define, at least compared to words documented in a particular lexicon, such words are not at all non-sensical. It's my hope that ambient language poetics might be further developed as a critical poetic that facilitates treating such words in more positive terms. Instead of identifying a word for what it lacks (circulation within common parlance or etymological records that precede its first appearance in a work), recognizing how these words may have come to be written and their influence on how a text is experienced by both the writer and reader. An alternative term that is already available is "invented word," which is more appropriate if we conceive of the act of invention not as it is more commonly used to mean "a creative effort by contrivance or design," but as its Latin origin suggests a "finding out" or a "stumbling upon."

aesthetic preference. Likewise, writing with ambient language poetics means writing without seeking correspondence (communication and representation).

Elsewhere in *Broken Dozer*, *Haunted Vale*, I used terms arrived at through their sound rather than their denotative value. The use of the term ‘nonpareil’ in “What If, Very Slowly . . .” and “florilegium” in “Lullaby in Seven Parts” (part 6) resulted from a combination of my having heard the words before, without (why should I be ashamed to admit) bothering to learn any of their dictionary definitions, combined with a searching for documented words that had the sounds I wanted to write.³ In both of these examples I was (like Kerouac, I imagine) pleasantly surprised to read through their definitions in the OED and find that “nonpareil” included among its definitions both “having no equal; unrivalled” (“nonpareil, adj1.”) and “short strands or particles of coloured sugar (frequently in the form of a multicoloured mixture) used to decorate or coat chocolates, cakes, etc” (“nonpareil, n3.”) That the “crown” in “What If, Very Slowly . . .” could take advantage of this polysemous play to be both without equal and comprised of tiny colorful sprinkles was a happy example of what ambient language poetics can admit to a poem. These accidents shouldn’t be confused with serendipity or great luck though. When writing with ambient language poetics, these accidents happen regularly, and are no more rare or challenging to execute in a poem than a simple ABAB end-rhyme scheme.

While similarities exist, ambient language poetics is not just Babble Flow by another name. Nothing about ambient language poetics requires the sound of language to

³ One simple way to conduct these sound searches in the moment one’s vocabulary falls short is to type invented words that contain the phonemes one is hearing into Google or an online dictionary and letting search engines suggest corrections pulled from recognized vocabulary.

lead the activity of writing. Sound may lead, as it does for Kerouac and Coolidge, but poets might pick any other material or conceptual quality of language to drive their writing activity, and the work could still be conceived in terms of ambient language. For example, from my manuscript, “And Maybe One More Question from the Audience” is propelled by my attempt to sustain an egregious qualifying remark in a farcical preface to an insipid question. A bit farce, a bit satire, a bit essay, this poem’s equivocating endurance goes just a little beyond what seemed to me to be tonally interesting or necessary. In pushing beyond what is interesting or necessary, the poem risks its own craftsmanship to clear space for spontaneous insight. The poem, however, never arrives at this insight, or at least not in a satisfyingly epiphanic fashion. Instead the final lines of “And Maybe One More Question from the Audience,” come to an anti-climax. For me, in the bathos of the resolving note of the closing line is a radical acceptance, a coming to terms with the insufficiency of rhetorical thought to achieve satisfying closure or a useful statement. More than an insult resulting from cynicism about the urgency of literary art, I tend to read the last line, “or because poets are just chicken?”, as a celebration of the fundamental inutility of poetry.

A poet might also follow visual cues, as is exemplified in concrete poetry or in poems that use unconventional visual formatting and white space as compositional techniques. In ambient language poetics, homographic association may be of equal impact and interest as the homophonic. “Boring is Bowering,” again from my manuscript, makes use of a homonym to draw on the idea of boring out an enclosed space (which conceptually contrasts with a bowering) and taking shelter within the familiar and relatively uninteresting. Though the full impact of homonyms as well as eye-rhymes (for

instance, laughter/daughter) are in part lost in oral recitations of poems, they do not go ignored by the poet as they handwrite or type their poems, nor by readers who come to the poetic work on the page. I claim that the impact is lost on the audience only in part because, while it is more difficult to pick up on techniques that appeal more directly to the eye when one can only listen to the poem, the visual play still haunts the ear. For example, when we hear someone today recite work by Shakespeare, we notice that twenty-first century pronunciations have drifted away from what was once the rhyme scheme, such that the end rhymes of lines two and four in, say, Sonnet 116 (“love” and “remove”), are now experienced mostly as an eye-rhyme. The sonic dissonance jolts us into the awareness of this kind of haunting of the ear. And in a willful manner, we may call to mind the spelling of these words as we are used to seeing them and intellectually understand the rhyme even though we cannot hear it as Shakespeare’s contemporary audience might have, regardless whatever efforts are made to use pronunciations that are believed to approximate early modern English.

The visual and sonic qualities of a poem are no less connected in instances where there isn’t a problem of historical variance in pronunciation. These connections are just harder to notice because there is nothing obvious to jar an audience out of familiar listening habits. Minding ambient language poetics when listening to a poem can be a gentle nudge out of these familiar habits and open up more ways to appreciate a poem. Indeed, minding ambient language poetics when encountering any kind of language can lead to reading anything as a poem. I encourage readers of poetry to resist the urge to dismiss the disposition of ambient language poetics as something frivolous, or worse, obfuscating the urgency (often rendered as socio-political or socio-emotional need) to

voice experiences and to really hear each other when we try to communicate. Ambient language poetics is a description of what language already does. Without this awareness and attunement to ambient language, our ability to hear becomes limiting and limited.

Ambient language poetics is a resignation to the inevitability that language sometimes makes fools of us all, and that this resignation is the necessary precondition for the potential of richer, spontaneous insight. Spontaneous in that these insights seem to suggest themselves in the writing process “as if spoken by another” when the poet least expects it and primarily when the poet is not expecting anything whatsoever. The necessary precondition of epiphany may not be a poet’s literary perception—that precision of the artist’s representation of the world that might produce wisdom. Instead, what is required is a nonjudgmental, non-expectant openness to material experience beginning first and foremost with language itself.

Ambient language poetics also requires a certain inclination toward radical inutility in making and reading poetry, which might lead to a subversion of the ornamentation of “poetic” writing. In *Life Breaks In: A Mood Almanack*, Mary Cappello provides what I think is an instructive example of the spirit of ambient language poetics. She describes a personal revelation after experiencing temporary hearing impairment resulting from a fall from a high-dive as a child. What she notices about this experience is that it had put her into a new, peculiar relationship to the sound of language. Cappello writes:

Blood had trickled out through my ear making the voices in an outer room seem swollen and muffled. The residue of those near-far voices, rising and falling, created a net or mesh made of all the tones that would necessitate my own future writing. Unlike kids who would beg to experience the privilege of staying up with the adults, ever since then, I preferred to listen to their voices from the vantage of my bedroom. I don’t want or need to

decipher the strange language that they speak; nor do I long to be let in on its secrets. I keen to it as a kind of night music or familial jazz laced with pleasure and sorrow. I make of it what I will in the where of my own becoming. (302)

Making what one wills in the where of their own becoming could be heard as a kind of foundational ethos for ambient language poetics. Cappello's writing in *Life Breaks In* wends toward thinking moods and atmospheres more explicitly than ambient language poetics, but she writes with a poet's ear, and, although I am not attempting to claim her work under the banner of ambient language, one can see a formative disposition toward language that is not far from what I hope ambient language poetics will facilitate for novice writers in the creative writing classroom or the experienced writer who may be seeking a reinvigorated rendezvous with the materiality of language. That Cappello connects this childhood shift in how she relates to language so strongly to her complex exploration of mood, atmospheres, and tones is not surprising. Indeed, my use of the term "ambient" will also invariably cause readers to associate ambient language with atmospherics, tone, moods, vibes and so on. And yet, for the sake of this introduction to ambient language poetics, I encourage readers not to move too quickly to notions of atmospheres and moods, lest they lose sight of the surround-ness, both-ness (*ambi-*) that constitutes the unremitting availability of language.

In keeping with this disposition of the both-sides-ness to language, ambient language poetics makes no hard distinction between what is said and how it is said. To say "form is an extension of content" is still an attempt to delineate what properly belongs to the category "form" and what to "content," and to explain one in terms of the other. Ultimately, rendering form in terms of content and vice versa can lead to simply reading elements of style and technique in poetry for their underlying rhetorical message,

as a means by which both form and content might become legible, purposeful, and worthy of critique. This approach is a return to the habits of the kind of close reading critic who wishes to skip straight to the element of most authorial design. But ambient language poetics is poetry without teleology. Or at least, what ends there may be for the composition of poem are sustained as open questions, all matters of perpetual speculation. Thinking language ambiently means, at the very least, being more hesitant to turn to the “form and content” frame of reference to say anything about language art in the first place.

What is conventionally thought of as questions of style, form and ornamentation is treated as the “content” of greatest interest in ambient language poetics. This kind of content is often recognized by the poet-reader to be accidental, or of fortuitous origins. In this essay, tracing the term “ambient” is going to send us hurtling toward “ambient music,” so it is worth lingering on the word “accidental” in its contronymic, musical sense. After all, having nowhere to go, no specific end to achieve, inevitably increases the amount of time one has for this kind of linguistic lollygagging. In music, an “accidental” is a symbol in musical notation that marks deviations or exceptions to the key signature or pitch (i.e. flats, sharps, naturals). An accidental can be almost surgical in its purpose to mark difference—a far cry from the adjectival meaning that something has happened by chance without intention or agency. If we keep in mind, however, Kerouac’s tendency to preserve error and use it as a spring board into other sounds and concepts, described by Coolidge as “riffing,” what is accidental in writing-typing-copying can become an accidental through the poet’s acceptance of what they have written/typed. Such accidentals blur the line between writing and typing.

I will further trace the term “ambient” through what I find to be its closest generic analogs and critical appositions in an effort to map the term as it applies to ambient language poetics. From each of the following critical and aesthetic uses of the term “ambient,” there will be something to pick up and add to our definition of ambient language poetics and something to help us differentiate it from its already well-worn usages in the critical and popular literature. Under consideration first will be the musical analogs of Brian Eno’s “ambient music” and this work’s influence on mainstream recording artist Bon Iver’s pop ambience, as well as the internet-based appropriative musical genre vaporwave. These two recent successors to Eno’s work bring to the fore one of the first anticipated points of resistance to ambient language poetics: a visceral aversion to ambiguity, uncertainty, and uncomfortably self-aware language in contemporary poetry. Then we will look at the critical apposition of Timothy Morton’s “ambient poetics,” which will help clarify how ambient language poetics does and does not address the concept of “environment.” Finally, by way of a case study of Tan Lin’s book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary: 2004*, I will explain how notions of ambient poetry/literature are treated in contemporary poetry. Lin’s work will help us understand what is generally meant today by artists who describe literary work as “ambient” and how ambient language poetics pushes beyond these familiar associations of the term with the concepts of calmness, relaxation, and meditation.

Ambient Music, Atmospheres, and Analogs

One principle of ambient language poetics is to go with what is within reach. This is not to say ambient language is always that language that springs to mind first or that feels most immediate. It is not stream-of-conscious or free association writing. Rather,

what is within reach can include resources such as archives, textbooks, dictionaries, and internet search engines, whether or not these resources are considered credible, reliable, or factual. In my poem, “Here Comes the Rabble Now,” Vantablack is the name of the Surrey NanoSystems designed super-black coating that has a hemispherical reflectance of less than 1% (“About Vantablack”). In other words, it reflects almost no light in the visible spectrum for a human. My poem references this specific extreme of human design. Despite having no experience in or familiarity with nanotechnology or aerospace engineering, the term is well within my reach since all one has to do to learn of its existence is to search the phrase “blackest black” in Google Search. Whether or not Vantablack is, technically speaking, the “blackest black” makes no difference in ambient language poetics because, as a poetic, it has little to offer in terms of distinguishing what is true. When poets take up the mantle to become arbiters of what is true, they may be at risk of falling back on problematic heuristics that undermine their goals of clarity and closure. An example might be the heuristic of “truthiness,” coined by the comedian Stephen Colbert, which describes an affective approximation of truth. Truthiness need not result from sinister motivations either. A poet seduced by their own song might easily mistake aesthetics for insight.

Ambient language poetics cannot necessarily preclude the patently false, imprudent, careless or absurd as this would contradict the descriptive and inclusive spirit of the poetic.⁴ Such ethical considerations have a place, but they belong to a critique of

⁴ Another example of this kind of fabrication in my manuscript is in the opening poem “Avant-Garde Nursery Rhyme for Display,” in which the speaker (who I anticipate the reader will, understandably, feel all too comfortable conflating with me as *the* author) claims to have had a dream about a train and a toy store. It’s highly likely someone somewhere has had a dream that matches this description, but it wasn’t me, and the speaker is a rhetorical device without dreams anyway. In this sense, the poem counterfeits without hesitation or purpose.

the actions of the poet, the critic, the casual reader. Rather, labels that tend to be used pejoratively with respect to literature are, if not artistic challenges, at least neutral descriptions in ambient language poetics: lazy, passive, pointless, ineffectual, banal, clever, ugly, broken, naïve, false, perverse, manipulative, etc. These terms represent radical possibilities and dangers in ambient language poetics but are not in and of themselves disqualifying signs of a defect in need of editing out. Other terms like “vague” and “abstract,” which are sometimes used to describe a defective composition, are also moot here because ambient language poetics has nothing new to say about the concepts of abstraction or figuration in poetry, only that they are, to varying degrees, qualities intrinsic to all kinds of language.

We can consider ambient language to include more than that which is immediately present to mind, because language, including invented language, precedes the writer. This is what the literary critic John Weightman wrote of when he said language was a prosthesis, something that can only be acquired as a historical and cultural construct (54). To extend his analogy a little further, we can consider the fact that prostheses are still prostheses even when they are not being utilized as such, since they retain in themselves as objects this potential deployment. That a word like “manxome” had, up until Lewis Carroll’s use of it, not been realized does not mean it wasn’t available; it was, if only as a possibility of English grammar. Ambient language poetics says that language, as an object, contains within itself its potential deployments in the same way any other object would before it comes to be of use. Which is to say, ambient language poetics takes for granted that language is language nevertheless, even when a human mind is not (yet) engaged with it.

What would be excluded, then, from the scope of ambient language is any language that would be impossible for one to reach, or be exposed to, such as an ancient text that has been lost to history, or not-yet-extant language like neologisms, slang, and technical jargon that has yet to emerge. Ambient language poetics resists a concept of “ambient” that is restricted to “immediate surroundings.” First of all, there is no such thing as unmediated surroundings if the word “surroundings” is to have any sense. And second, “immediate” can also mean “instantaneous,” happening in a single moment, and ambient language poetics retains the possibility of exploring linguistic surroundings slowly and diachronically as in the long-form, slow musical compositions that are commonly found within the ambient music genre.

A question races to mind: is ambient language poetics just ambient music somehow translated into verse? After all, poetry is a sibling genre to music, and colloquial conflations like the idea that song lyrics are poetry set to music might suggest that one should be able to lift ambient music aesthetics and drop them on top of something called a “poem” and call it a day.⁵ Setting aside the obvious challenges that arise when one tries to take a typically wordless genre such as ambient music and approximate it in a language artform, the one-to-one comparison is not helpful for understanding ambient language poetics anyway, because in this poetic “ambient” is not primarily designating the affect, tone, mood, of language in the same way the “ambient”

⁵ Poetry is already set to music. Even without backing instrumentation, poetry is music at least in the sense that both concepts refer to an organization of sound. This is why the label “lyric poetry” does not designate poetry *qua* singing; that would be redundant, and it isn’t how the term has actually been used by most American poets in the last fifty years. Rather, lyric poetry often designates a certain poetic of the speaking subject, both as a privileging of subjectivity (as more or less an outward expression of some inner emotional state) and the primacy of concern for the rhetorical message of one’s poem as epiphanic exercise. For a more detailed discussion of why the category “lyric poetry” should probably be retired altogether, see Gillian White’s analysis in *Lyric Shame* of how the term has been fallaciously deployed as an attack by poets against other poets.

of ambient music does. What affective or atmospheric principles of ambient music might look like when applied to literary art has already been explored by the poet Tan Lin and his “ambient stylistics,” with compelling results, as I will address in a later on.

If one can set aside for a moment the ambiance of ambient music and its adjacent genres (ambient dub, ambient drone, ambient house, ambient black metal, etc.), the genre can be helpful in conceptualizing some principles of ambient language poetics all the same, particularly as it deals with distracted or peripheral attention. Much of the critical literature traces the term “ambient” as an aesthetic term through Brian Eno’s use of it in the liner notes of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. Eno defines ambience as “an atmosphere, or surrounding influence: a tint.” He says that “Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular,” famously adding, “it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.” Music philosopher John Lysaker sums up the idea that was concentrated into Eno’s term “ambient”: “Peripheral attention stands in contrast to focal attention, though not as passive to the latter’s activity” (157). This interest in peripheral attention, as Lysaker points out, was not original to Eno. One can trace such notions of peripheral music back to, at least, eighteenth century composer George Philipp Telemann’s *Tafelmusik*, through Erik Satie’s 1917 compositions that he categorized as *musique d’ameublement* (furniture music), and onwards to the background Muzak of mid-century American department stores and elevators (156-7). When Eno ascribed the term “ambient” to the concept of background music he was also signifying something about what it means for art to be backgrounded, attended to only in part. He stitched together the notion of peripheral attention, tone, mood, and atmosphere as he experimented within his new genre. For Eno,

ambient music was about an accounting of ambiance and attention, where it is paid, what kind of attention is being paid, and how it is paid. In terms of what “ambient” means to ambient language poetics, Enno’s work before *Ambient 1*, particularly his role in the band Roxy Music, which mostly consisted of live mixing the instruments other band members played with his VCS3 synthesizer, and the aleatoric compositions of his more recent work such as *Reflection* (2017) and *Music for Installations* (2018) is a better analog, because these works emphasize using the sound materials that were available and within reach of Enno rather than attempting to actively cultivate an affective atmosphere, which was more often than not calculatingly calm, reserved, and unobtrusive. One problem with Enno’s definition of “ambient” is that it is applicable to almost any genre or style of music (or any form of art for that matter), which goes some of the way in explaining why the term keeps reappearing as a descriptor in the arts. Since Enno strongly links “ambient” to “ambiance” and questions of (in)attention, anything that a reader/audience stops giving their full attention to may be considered ambient. All art is as ignorable as it is interesting.

To conceive of what is ambient in ambient language poetics is to include mood and atmospheric qualities of language, but this is not enough. Ambient language poetics says that language is material and separable from human interpretation. The British cultural critic and political activist Mark Fisher wrote about capitalism’s affective force in his book *Capitalist Realism* in a manner that can help illuminate ambient language poetic’s sense of ambient further. Fisher suggests that capitalism creates moods, and the most pervasive of these moods are anxiety and depression (35). But capitalism isn’t just

a vibe or a feeling unconsciously sensed by consumer-subjects, it operates with a material pressure that also limits the scope of creative possibilities.

In one anecdote from his years as a college teacher, Fisher relates how one of the students in his class would either wear headphones with no music playing through them or in other instances play music through the headphones and not wear them, thus rendering the music inaudible (24). Is music still music if no one is around to hear it? Fisher's conclusion as to why his student seemed to have a relationship to music defined by radically distracted non-listening, even to the point where there was no music being played at all, comes down to the ubiquity and inevitability of pleasure promised by capitalism and the interpassivity of the subject under late capitalism. He writes:

Why wear the headphones without playing music or play music without wearing headphones? Because the presence of the phones on the ear or the knowledge that the music is playing . . . was a reassurance that the [sensation-stimulus] matrix was *still there*, within reach. (Fisher 24)

Interpassivity is a concept Fisher borrows from media theorist Robert Pfaller (Fisher 12). It refers to the way in which technological apparatuses and media itself is leveraged to enjoy, consume, or otherwise act in place of the human subject. Fisher's example is the Disney Pixar film *Wall-E* for the way it performs the viewers anti-capitalism for them, relieving the guilt of capitalist consumption and freeing the subject to resume their uninhibited participation in capitalist society (12). Regarding the student playing music through headphones at an inaudible volume, Fisher says, at the very least, the music player could listen on the student's behalf (24). While Eno's sense of ambient focuses on that which vacillates between background and foreground depending on the attentiveness of the listener, ambient language poetics' sense of ambient adds to this definition language that is *not even* background. The billboard advertisements along abandoned

roads, the words in the book of poetry gifted by a friend that has since sat shelved and unopened, the paragraphs of the lengthy journal article that are skipped and skimmed over by a reader hunting for a specific keyword, the obscure website about a niche hobby that never occurred to the user of a search engine to look for. These examples are ambient language despite never rising to the level of attention that could even be called “background.” Because these words, phrases, sounds, communiques, etc. are within reach of the poet they retain the potential for surprise, insight, disappointment, confusion, and so on. In this sense, the most ambient music Eno ever made is that which lay on the literal and proverbial cutting room floor, not the tracks I might intentionally play when I want to create a warm, relaxing environment within which I can attend to other things.

When Fisher speaks of interpassivity as an element of capitalism he describes it as a phenomenon harmful to the human subject; it fragments the subject and leads to what he calls a “post-lexia,” rather than dyslexia (25). Why must the fact that some language is unread or unreadable be taken as a capitalist pathology rather than an artistic opportunity? Post-lexia need not be limited to or equated with illiteracy. Has so-called late capitalism created a new problem that is now incumbent upon artists and activists to remedy, or has it simply exposed something that has largely gone under-examined? Not to seize on the creative possibilities of post-lexical art in order to instead bemoan capitalism’s hedonistic and deleterious effects on culture is to resign oneself to a fatalistic, despairing line of thought that says that the days of art and literature’s greatest potency are long gone unless we can achieve some kind of social revolution. I impatiently await the socialist future Fisher hoped for and wrote towards, but I’m simply not ready to write elegies to art, literature, or music because culture under capitalism has

altered previous understandings of how human–art relations were once and are still now mediated.

Influence of Brian Eno and Ambient Music

There are at least two identifiable, though not entirely separable, lines of aesthetic response to the question of how to handle the binary of active engagement/passive listening (background/foreground) that Eno’s ambient music opened up. The first is what I will call the “cynical” approach and is best represented by the early twenty-first century music genre vaporwave. The second response is a countervailing “sincere” approach encapsulated by the sonic ambiguity, emphasis on mood/tone, and inarticulate lyrics of the works of Justin Vernon in his decade-long project Bon Iver.

Here I’ve selected a unified body of work that is subject to commercial trademark, intellectual property claims and publishing contracts (Bon Iver) to contrast with a genre (vaporwave) that straddles the border between social experiment and aesthetic movement. I could have selected from a bevy of popular “experimental pop/rock” artists before, after, and contemporaneous to the Bon Iver LPs like Radiohead, Explosions in the Sky, Sigur Ros, Animal Collective, James Blake, etc. The musical elements that will be salient for ambient language poetics are shared by a wide range of recording artists as electronic recording software has become more sophisticated and available in the decades after Eno’s Roxy Music synthesizer experiments. This technological emergence is also no doubt a determining factor in the increased use of atmospherics and found materials by recording artists, (e.g. samples and computer-generated sounds). As we will see, this overdetermination between creative impetus and material availability is central to ambient language poetics.

To contrast a commercially unified body of work with a disparate genre is also to illustrate the difference between post-Eno artists and post-ambient music. Where the former seems to have commercial viability owing at least in part to centering the individual expressiveness of the singer-songwriter persona, the latter undermines the logics of voice through recycled audio and decentralized authorship, thus there is no artist to sign to a recording contract, no creator to accept an award from a self-selecting group of cultural tastemakers and gate-keepers, no songwriter for intellectual property patent trolls to sue, no public relations expert to help with an artist's image. The point here is not that one approach is more ethical or politically urgent than the other. Nor should either of these two approaches take as their primary thematic concern the cynical or sincere worldviews (whatever one holds those to entail); vaporwave can result in earnest musical projects that sound like odes to previous eras, and Bon Iver songs can dip into profound skepticism and ironic detachment from the work of art itself. Vaporwave has been described as a political art that asks what we are to do with the ideological debris of late twentieth-century capitalism in the wake of the recession, subprime mortgage crisis, and bank failures of 2008. Bon Iver explores notions of artistic intent, individualism, and introspection. Both incorporate the aleatoric techniques, environmental composition, distortion-manipulation of audio recordings, and atmospherics of Eno's ambient music. And both help introduce the vital ambivalence at the core of ambient language poetics: a singing that leads to a dispersed and malleable sense of self that has little to do with an insistence upon ideas of intention, free will, speech, and rhetorical messaging that is, at the same time, unable to deny the reality of these phenomena because of the differences they create.

The Pop Ambience of Bon Iver

Part of the early appeal of Justin Vernon's first record under the name Bon Iver (*For Emma, Forever Ago*) was, at least for music journalists, its origin story, as such an emphasis on process and working conditions of the artist has long been familiar territory for music journalists. Despite the album falling comfortably into a folk-pop category, which is usually treated by critics with a focus on the bardic singer-songwriter, *For Emma, Forever Ago* was treated by music journalists as though it were an art pop or experimental record. Part of this critical focus is attributable to what Vernon chooses to address in interviews when he is often calmly resisting questions about the rhetorical messages or the subject matter of his songs. He instead turns to descriptions of the writing experience and his creative process that is reminiscent of the way Coolidge described Kerouac. That both Vernon and music critics focus on the material circumstances surrounding the creation of the work of art and the compositional process is a hint toward its apposition to ambient language poetics. A closer look at these circumstances will be even more illustrative.

The mythos behind Bon Iver's inaugural album could sound as if it had been invented for the purpose of explicating principles of ambient language poetics. First, Vernon's choice of the artist name is the result of his exposure to and lack of competence in elementary French language. "Bon Iver" is a misspelling of the French phrase "bon hiver" ("good winter") and as such "Bon Iver" is not a part of either English or French lexicons; it is an anticognate. Cognates are words that share a linguistic derivation or root. Anyone who has spent even a short amount of time studying a foreign language is familiar with the idea of false cognates, words that merely appear to be etymologically

related because of similarities in spelling or pronunciation (“embarazada” means “pregnant” in Spanish and is not etymologically related to the English word “embarrassed”). An anticognate, however, I define as a distortion into a linguistic accidental,⁶ in that it marks a deviation from standardized spelling. And I don’t like the term “bastardized” to describe this linguistic commonality because it is too suggestive of something metaphysical about the impurity of the resulting language. Nor is “Bon Iver” like a loanword, as it isn’t used in any adopting language to mean “good winter.” It is instead marking the imprecision of language as it is encountered and as it comprises the linguistic systems we rely on in a pragmatic, everyday sense.

That the name Bon Iver is a linguistic accidental means that Vernon did not just make a mistake in the spelling. He says he liked the phrase “bon hiver” after he heard it, and even more so after someone had translated it for him. After looking up the spelling, however, he said “looking at it didn’t make any sense” and that he didn’t feel anything when he saw it; he said he was hoping it would be spelled “bon iverre” (Mason-Campbell). This kind of engagement with language is a hopeful anticipation that dissolves into disappointment, but not because the language has failed in some sense. Vernon’s attraction to the phrase “bon hiver,” was not predicated upon its definition in the first place. Looking at “bon hiver,” Vernon is not including either of the two commonly cited qualities of poetry (sound and meaning) as explanations for his indifferent feelings. He knew how to pronounce the phrase and what it meant and soon he had learned its accepted spelling. Only then did he make the choice to preserve the

⁶ Not to be confused with an accidental gap, which is a word that could theoretically exist in keeping with a given language’s grammatical rules but is not, in fact, a part of said language. “Accidental” in “accidental gap” means something like “circumstantial.”

surprise—not in a fast-paced, improvisational riffing like Kerouac jumping from thought-sound to thought-sound and living with the results whatever they may be, but in a slow process that finds an affective analog in lingering disappointment rather than the instantaneity targeted in Kerouac’s Bop Prosody/Babble Flow.

Indeed, marked in Vernon’s excision of the “h” in “bon hiver” is a disappointment that results from a disposition toward language as material object that resembles how a graphic artist might approach typography. Font and typeface matter; they make a difference. Sometimes a **huge** difference that elicits very *visceral* reactions from a reader. This is one reason why acceptable fonts and typefaces are included in formatting guidelines and submission instructions. A publisher who is sensitive to ambient language poetics would ask their contributors for permission before publishing a poem in a different typeface than it was submitted in, and in the event the submitting writer declines, such a publisher would opt to print the poem in the submitted typeface rather than rescind the offer of publication because the individual poem is more important than the stylistic continuity—a kind of deceptive signaling of a continuity of editorial vision that is impossible—of the platform which publishes it.⁷ Likewise, poets open to ambient language poetics would be more likely than others to reject changing the typeface if asked, because they’re more likely to have at least thought about how the poem looks as integral to the work itself, just as Vernon considered the rough “demo” production quality of the tracks on the first Bon Iver album to be integral to the project as a whole.⁸

⁷ One new poetry magazine that prioritizes the visual aesthetic choices by poets (respecting typeface, font, font color, etc.) is *SPAM zine*. The editorial project of this online zine is situated very near vaporwave and shares a fetish for aesthetic iconoclasm with Flarf poetry.

⁸ Vernon wrote and recorded the entire album during his convalescent time in his family’s cabin in Eau Claire, Wisconsin thinking (so the story goes) that the recordings would serve as demos to be used to produce the album after he recovered. But the production quality of the recordings was of a time and place that Vernon became convinced were integral to the project (Hyden).

Vernon's engagement with language exemplified in his disaffection with the spelling of "bon hiver" is not easily described in terms of an internal/external binary paradigm of language. A language experience characterized primarily by an alienation resulting from a word received as unfamiliar (by not matching the spelling, sound, semantic value one expects) renders this engagement in terms of language's externality to Vernon. In other words, it was not what he had "in mind." However, it's at least as likely that his disappointment with the spelling was caused by the sense that it was too familiar, intimate, and already "internalized." Vernon says in an interview with A.V. Club that "hiver,"⁹ reminded him of the word "liver," which had become for him the literal site of an infection he battled after contracting mononucleosis (Hyden). In this sense, the name of this musical project and the music on the album was like the filtrate of an experience in which Vernon was caught up and to which he could hardly return later on, much less transfer to or share with an audience.

The kind of vaporous lyricism that emerges as a description or residual image of an experience later forgotten or otherwise abjected, has a precedent in poetry in a poem like Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter," in which the speaker explains that he was thinking of the color orange, and that this led him to start writing a poem about the color orange (lines 17–18); however, he is shortly led away from writing a poem to writing in excess "whole pages of words," (20) he calls "prose," (25) about "how terrible orange is/ and life" (lines 23–24). Eventually the speaker returns to finish the poem he had previously only produced one line of. He notes that he didn't even mention the idea

⁹ Many English speakers pronounce the artist name "bahn AI-ver," to rhyme with the English word "striver" rather than "shiver," but Vernon, in a move that any ambient language poetics-sensitive writer can appreciate, said he doesn't care how anyone pronounces it.

of orange in the poem, and that the poem became a series of twelve poems, which also do not refer once to orange (lines 25-27). He nevertheless titles the series “ORANGES” (28). That O’ Hara’s speaker-poet gives us the backstory to the inspiration of his series of poems instead of the poems themselves is the inverse of what Vernon gives the audience, both in his chosen artist name and most of his song lyrics.

In my own work, particularly in poems like “So” and “As Silent as the Mirror Behaves,” what remains on the page is not a representation or telling about an experience nor a thetic meditation on some subject matter. “So” likely began as such an attempt at a meditation on some subject, and is explicable to some extent, but I’ve long forgotten most of the details of what that subject might have been, not to mention the affective experience that may have motivated those thoughts. The poem exists now roughly equally accessible and interpretable to any reader as it would be to me, the poet-of-record. My priority in writing the poem was not that its lines should parse into paraphrasable rhetorical units—that it need not accomplish anything like communication, whatever it seems to say. Driven primarily by sound and texture of a word, the mouthfeel, “So” acts on a reader physically, corporeally, and can induce in a reader the semantic satiation of the small titular word with almost too many definitions and usages to keep track of.

“So” is not a difficult poem (this would imply there is some task one should accomplish with it), but it is a difficult poem for most readers to identify with; for one thing, it doesn’t explicitly deploy a stable speaker’s “I.” And it’s not a poem that is likely to be described as “relatable.” By relatability I mean that largely affective quality of art that makes one feel as though someone else has already said something about one’s own

deeply personal but (up until now) inarticulable experiential. “So” no longer relates, or explains, or captures, or describes, or represents, if it ever did. Relatability of a work of art is a fiction for both the audience and the artist, which is not to say it can’t be strongly felt by the audience or partially accounted for by the artist. Yet, poetry is not *merely* an externalized internality (self-expression) nor an internalized externality (social construction site). Racing to simplify matters by arguing the work is “both” or “neither” internal/external only encourages one to continue to traffic in these muddled terms. Instead we could describe the work of art and its material as ambient.

The problem this description alleviates may not, at first, seem all that important from the perspective of the reader or literary critic seeking to make use of and consume art. For the poet, however, it can reduce the influence of the constricting belief on the creative process that poetry ought always to speak true, or that it should facilitate our being human and help us endure it. A thousand think-pieces are published every April during National Poetry Month arguing something to this effect, and I am not arguing that the think-pieces are wrong; they’re just incomplete. It’s therefore reasonable to assume they impact far fewer people than they otherwise could. By conceiving of language as ambient material for making, the poet might find permission to explore and experiment with language in ways that they otherwise might never attempt if they believed their sole duty was to take on a role as artist that is situated somewhere between therapist and priest.¹⁰ An experienced and practiced poet ought to be wary of the idea that new and

¹⁰ I would be remiss and hypocritical if I didn’t clarify here that not only has every single one of my poetry teachers as well as my most beloved poetry friends fallen somewhere in this approximate role—either for me through our personal relationships or for their readers through their work—I also have my poetic roots in the belief in the therapist-priest poet. But I do not understand ambient language poetics to threaten or undermine this belief or the work resulting from it. I am trying to humbly remind—or maybe propose for the first time to some—writers that there is much more that can be done with language than we tend to do, and even more that language just does, whether or not we want it to, whether or not we notice it doing it.

novice poets should be encouraged to adopt priestly artistic burden, as though it were a sacred duty. Wary, first of all, because of how many people who have no interest in either therapy or prophecy but might otherwise enjoy reading and writing poetry. These potential readers of poetry are not being spoken to at all by this kind of branding, and they are, therefore, unlikely to become interested in poetry, which is ostensibly the goal of most publishers and the Academy of American Poets's National Poetry Month. Of greatest concern, perhaps, is that, like all attempts at hagiarchy, the therapist-priest role gives too much blanket credibility to the genre at large, as though poets hardly ever lie, or as though poetry only rarely, or never, abets cruelty or suffering. Even great poetry, especially great poetry, can be used to obscure a multitude of sins, and the current state of poetry seems woefully ill-equipped, even unwilling to come to terms with the frailty and fallibility of the poet. Ambient language poetics proposes an alternative ideas of truth and prophecy that says poetry is the place wherein a poet must always confront their fallibility, their inability to make all the abstraction and complexity of experience make sense.

The more optimistic and compositionally relevant advantage of ambient language poetics is the creative discoveries it might lead to for the language artist (and the creative writing student in particular). How such creative possibilities can emerge can be glimpsed in Vernon's approach to writing and singing song lyrics. Again, in the A.V. Club interview in which he explains his emotional reaction to the word "hiver," Vernon says that his song writing approach began with a narrative purpose. Or as he describes it: "I've been into the [Bruce] Springsteen thing, writing pretty literally and trying to tell stories." But then he says that on *For Emma, Forever Ago* "... I was creating sounds

first,” meaning he “would create a space for the vocals, then transcribe vocal sounds and listen to what it sounded like.” Here we can see something like a slow and meticulous Babble Flow rather than Kerouac’s fast-paced improvisation. Vernon’s is not a revolutionary new approach to writing song lyrics or poetry. The strategy of using temporary place-holder sounds when composing a melody is almost ubiquitously described by songwriters as one of the creative techniques they rely on to write songs. Nor is it uncommon that placeholder sounds end up in the album-version of a song, as is often the case in pop music. Whether the sounds are remnants of a failed attempt to come up with more meaningful lyrics, or intentionally playful and easy to sing along to, one may glimpse the relative insignificance of the artist’s intention. This re-prioritization of intent is at the heart of ambient language poetics.

For Vernon there is a second opportunity in the delivery and performance of the song to keep the lyrics in a roughly unintelligible, non-thetic style, allowing the listener to play songwriter when the enunciation of the lines dips below the level necessary for a semantic transfer to occur. Vernon’s wide vocal dynamics, tendency to slur or cut off words, and layering of vocal tracks with the instruments creates an opening for mis-hearings and sonic lacunae that act as low lying ground into which meaning, concocted by an audience, surges. The technique is reminiscent of the singing style on Eno’s pre-ambient record *Here Come the Warm Jets*. A particularly apt example can be found in the first track from this album, “Needles in the Camel’s Eye.” Part of the pleasure of listening to songs like these is that this lyrical stylization forces mis-hearings or multiple hearings on the part of the audience. This phenomenon of mis-hearings and sonic distortions might remind one of the poetry performances of Tracie Morris, specifically in

poems like "Little Girl" or "Chain Gang," to name but two prominent examples. And on the page, Harryette Mullen's *S*PeRM**K*T* and *Muse and Drudge* also draws on the sounds of found and familiar language to produce and create a multiplicity of meanings.¹¹

Through the course of the four Bon Iver albums, Vernon increasingly leans on imprecision in singing, as the production concerns move from an emphasis on a singer-songwriter in isolation (on *For Emma, Forever Ago*) to a highly-wrought experimentation (on *22, A Million* and *i, i*). Lines from the first Bon Iver album like "Come on skinny love just last the year," could sound to some ears like "Come on skinny love, let us see you" ("Skinny Love"). From the same song, another example: "Suckle on the hope in light brassieres," could sound, because of how Vernon delivers it, something like "Circled all the hope and left disease." The opportunity for mondegreens, or misheard lyrics, grows with the peculiarity and abstraction of Vernon's phrases. Not only is it often difficult to make out what he is singing, the audience's best guesses are also disrupted by the strangeness and obfuscation of the written lyrics themselves, leading to further error and opportunity. On Bon Iver's second album, *Bon Iver*,¹² one line from the song "Perth" appears on the lyric sheet as "So I'm riddling all your stories," and was transcribed by a user of the popular music social media site Genius.com as "So I'm ridding all your stories," without the "L" in riddling. And when heard sung on the album, some listeners

¹¹ For a more theoretical discussion of the Black avant-garde techniques of improvisation and sonic play see Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.

¹² The liner notes and lyrics included with the physical LP version of this album come in a booklet with the title stylized as "bon iver, bon iver," even though the album is marketed and published under the album name "Bon Iver" and is technically considered to be a self-titled record. To simply reference the album as "self-titled," however, closes off some of the opportunity to make playful connections. For instance, if the album is taken to be titled "bon iver, bon iver" as the lyric booklet has it, then it could be a foreshadowing of the title of the fourth album, titled *i, i*. In elementary computer programming, the letter "i" is a common variable and could be interpreted as another way to say "bon iver, bon iver." It also suggests the Rastafarian term "I and I," which signifies a oneness between God and every human.

might be able to hear “So I’m writing all your stories.” Depending on a listener’s approach to the song, said “stories” could go from revealing/testing (riddling) to prohibiting (ridding) to co-authoring (writing), or in some other order as a result of language’s mutability, human error, and the exaggerated imprecision of Vernon’s singing style. By the third album, *22, A Million*, Vernon is starting to introduce more elements of typographical art and concrete poetry into the song titles and album art while continuing to play with the multiple hearings that result from under-enunciating the lyrics. An obvious example of this can be found in the song “715 - CRΣΣKS,” stylized with the capital Greek letter sigma instead of the Latin capital “E.” Thus the song title brings to mind both “Creeks” and “Greeks” at more or less the same time. And the song as heard on the album closes with the line “Turn around now, you’re my A Team,” which is somehow easy to hear in Vernon’s slurred delivery as “Turn around now, you’re mighty.” The effect changes the more times the listener spends with the Bon Iver discography, owing to more familiarity with the songs and Vernon’s performance style.

Less convinced of one’s own command of language to articulate a clear enough message and dubious of the absent reader’s ability (and interest) to interpret an explicit rhetorical message, the writer is freed up to have a working experience with the material of their art without the demand that they speak, that they say something meaningful without asking for too much effort on the part of the audience to understand what is being said. It’s important to note, however, that rather than being some anti-capitalist or anti-consumerist approach to art, this altered relationship between the writer and their ambient language may still produce highly commodifiable and marketable art objects if that is one’s aim. Art need not be divided into the categories of “interpretable messages” and

“nonsense/art for art’s sake.” Such an approach results in a limiting, false choice that tends to be reified into pedantic and pointless debates about what is “lyric” and what is “experimental” or what is “political” and what is “avant-garde” as though these labels were ever useful for describing art or the complexities of its production.

Taken as one principle of ambient language, the resistance to this thetic intentionality for creative play exemplified by Bon Iver, is found in *Broken Dozer*, *Haunted Vale* in a piece like “Amnesia Poem,” which contains two poems, one written by a kind of free-association, and one generated by ordering all the discrete language units of the first poem in alphabetical order. The first poem struggles to realize a new image, a new story to tell, as it continues to break off and restart mid-sentence, mid-thought. As soon as a thought begins to come into focus it is wiped from the board, as a kind of defective continuous present. The second poem, now with a new aleatoric ordering of terms, struggles to recall any of the phrasing or half-thought thoughts of the first ordering of terms. The difference between the two poems in terms of their success/failure at rendering a speaking subject reminds me of the difference between retrograde amnesia (the inability to remember the past) and anterograde amnesia (the inability to form new memories) and what these amnesiac forms suggest about the persistence of humans—in the face of the extreme imprecision of identity formation and our stochastic attribution of conscious intent to any and all ecological objects—to treat objects that are not ourselves, which include poems (and novels, stars, lakes, viruses, climate change, the economy, humans, visible light, non-visible light, sharks, dreams, wind) as either resources for human use or threats to be eliminated.

Vernon's music may be considered ambient in the sense of ambient language poetics because it is predicated on a sincere desire to minimize one's self-awareness and intentionality by his own account—the very null point which gives support to a concept of the surround—in the aesthetic play of the creative process. But Bon Iver also has an undeniably broad appeal, owing to the music's grounding in pop sensibilities, foremost of which is Vernon's emphasis on melody. Eno had a similar grounding in his music that no doubt contributed to his relative popularity compared to other musical artists who were also experimenting with aleatoric and atonal compositional techniques contemporaneously. For this reason, Bon Iver could be considered “post-Eno” more than “post-ambient music.” This is what I mean by calling Bon Iver a sincere successor to Eno's work. The Bon Iver discography provides a transgeneric analog to ambient language poetics through slow improvisation, preservation of so-called error, and dispersed intentionality.

Vaporwave as Cultural Vaporware

Brian Eno's popularization of the manipulation of recorded audio as a primary rather than secondary compositional technique is also inherited by makers of vaporwave music. One of the first completely internet-centric genres of music, vaporwave is characterized by an ironic recycling of the sounds and images of American and Japanese popular culture of the 1980s and '90s (Harper), which became increasingly available and reiterable in the era of early twenty-first century technocapitalism.¹³ In his 2016 book

¹³ Technocapitalism, I think, is a more neutral term in contrast to the term “late capitalism,” or “late-stage capitalism,” which anticipates a near term collapse of the structural and ideological supports for capitalism (meaning, most generally and insufficiently here, an economic system contingent upon privately owned resources or capital). Technocapitalism, then, is a reference to the variety of ways new technologies such as the internet have affected various capitalisms around the world.

Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts, Grafton Tanner

defines vaporwave as “the musical product of a culture plagued by trauma and regression in late capitalism” (12). While some artists who are identified with vaporwave claim that their work is intended as an indictment of the condition of human life under capitalism, some scholars argue that the genre is instead defined by its very undecidability as a genre offering a critique or celebration (or both) of the popular cultural aesthetics of late twentieth-century capitalism. In their article “‘Vaporwave Is (Not) a Critique of Capitalism’: Genre Work in an Online Music Scene,” Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak argue, “positioning vaporwave as an ambivalent critique of capitalism is a central and constitutive feature of the genre, rather than a gloss on it” (452). For Whelan and Nowak this undecidability is at the heart of any discussion about vaporwave and thus, for them, becomes its most defining characteristic.

Still, other scholars, like music ethnographers Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth center their analyses of vaporwave around the idea that it is a “nostalgia genre,” meaning it takes as a core aesthetic concern “. . . the recovery, re-imagination and remediation of past popular-cultural and media epochs” (625). What sets vaporwave apart from other nostalgia genres¹⁴ is its autochthony to the internet. Born and Haworth argue that vaporwave is the only genre “in which the net itself becomes central to the creative practices defining the genre,” which act as a “. . . shared horizon of meaning, content medium, production studio, and means of distribution” (605). Vaporwave is a genre composed of the ambient materials made available on the internet itself.

¹⁴ Born and Haworth name three other nostalgia genres of music in their article: hauntology, hypnogogic pop, and chillwave.

Like Eno, vaporwave artists are interested in the felt ubiquity of music that is not designed for attentive listening but is instead used to smooth over the uncomfortable edges of late twentieth-century life (particularly in the United States and Japan), and that which is mundane, tedious, cold, corporate, and banal. Unlike Eno, vaporwave artists are not seeking to create music that exists somewhere between the background and foreground. Instead they aim to foreground ironically “bad” music of past eras. Music critic Adam Harper was one of the first to attempt to describe the genre to general audiences. In his article “Comment: Vaporwave and the Pop Art of the Virtual Plaza,” Harper says:

The typical vaporwave zip file (album, if you like) presents itself as a collection of inspiringly modern, motivational and mood-regulating settings—perfect for that infomercial, that menu screen, that in-flight safety video, that business park promotional video . . .

And Whelan and Nowak explain how this might be read as a critique of capitalism:

The cleverness of vaporwave . . . is that it begins to impact upon the evaluative capacity itself, perhaps through its odd, unapologetically pleasurable transvaluation or redemption of “bad” music from the past. Vaporwave here might be a critique of capitalism, but if it is, it is the kind of critique which also undermines, or . . . accelerates, the moment of critical insight by pre-emptively turning it against itself. (457)

In other words, if there is an attempt to critique capitalism by ironically recycling the anonymous background music of middle-class (largely American) life and to hold a mirror up to these so-called capitalist aesthetics, then the genre’s critique is undermined by its own utter dependency on these cultural artifacts to produce the music itself. Furthermore, in the same way that Fisher’s understanding of interpassivity helps explain how media can perform politics on behalf of the audience, as he claims is the case with a film like Pixar’s *Wall-E*, vaporwave holds open multiple political perspectives without

committing either to a critique nor a celebration of its available materials. Both options are ambiguously presented. Vaporwave songs call to the listener both as an alarm to wake up from some supposed ideological fantasy and as a familiar lullaby to which one might fall back asleep, all with the comforting assurance that our memories of the past are accurate and uncomplicated.

James Parker of the music review site Tiny Mix Tapes says that the ambiguous presentation is the result of vaporwave being “a form of appropriation art” that is

. . . dredged from the nether regions of the internet, which [vaporwave artists] then reframe (sometimes obviously looped, pitched, and screwed; sometimes not) in an intriguingly ambivalent gesture between endorsement and critique. Sometimes the effect is genuinely sublime. Often it remains vacant and grotesque.

Adding to the genre’s tendency to undermine whatever critique it might offer is the frequency with which artists sample popular and easy-listening music of past eras. While Born and Haworth emphasize vaporwave’s early internet aesthetics, they don’t say much about the obvious influences of 1980s pop music on the genre. On one of the inaugural vaporwave albums, *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus, listeners can recognize samples from Diana Ross, Sade, the pop-rock band Pages, and Zapp. Similarly, samples from Fleetwood Mac, Toto, and Heart can be found on another genre-defining vaporwave album, *Eccojams Vol. 1* by Chuck Person.¹⁵ These sampled artists were and still are genuinely enjoyable to many listeners. Indeed, their catchiness and pop sensibilities were assiduously scouted for and cultivated by music industry executives to be as widely appealing as possible. When these kinds of songs show up in vaporwave music they may

¹⁵ Vaporwave artists post tracks to the internet under multiple different pseudonyms. For instance, among the early godparents of vaporwave is Ramona Xavier, who has released tracks under the name Macintosh Plus, Vektroid, New Dreams Ltd., and others, and Daniel Lopatin whose artistic pseudonyms include Chuck Person and Oneohtrix Point Never.

be slowed down, pitched up, or otherwise manipulated in a way that makes the song strange to listeners, but the music is rarely rendered wholly unrecognizable. When listeners find themselves sincerely, unironically enjoying parts of vaporwave songs that sample familiar easy-listening and pop music, they may find themselves appreciating the work as an homage more than a pastiche or parody. The artist/audience sometimes can't help, at times, but to get caught up in the very spell the music is ostensibly aiming to interrupt.

Vaporwave plays with the nostalgia of the sounds of the 1980s and '90s specifically as they became available on the internet. But for vaporwave artists, it is not necessarily a nostalgia for a personal experience. Many vaporwave artists were young children or not yet born in the '80s and '90s. They are a generation of so-called digital natives picking through what they see as the cultural residue of a previous civilization, and their nostalgia is for a past that they found already mediated and distorted by the internet itself. It is a nostalgia for a past that never existed, but one they are free to reimagine and reassemble because its cultural remnants and aesthetic signifiers still circulate online. If these artists remember anything like a spirit of prosperity and optimism about the general state of capitalism during this period—in the vein of, say, Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" remarks after fall of the Soviet Union—it is a memory like that of a child, heavily mediated by adults. This rose-colored-glasses perspective of past optimism, Grafton Tanner argues, may have come into stark contrast for some of these artists when, as young adults, they began to become aware of and share in their parents' disillusionment with the promises of capitalism in the wake of the Great Recession in the years following 2007 (77).

The releases of the first exemplary albums of vaporwave coincided with the start of the Occupy Wall Street movement, a mass protest action in response to the economic distress many people experienced as a result of the Great Recession. Whether this contemporaneity is meaningful or not, again, is the constitutive debate at the center of the genre. Daniel Lopatin's *Eccojams Vol. 1* is released in 2010, James Ferraro's *Far Side Virtual* in October 2011, and Macintosh Plus' *Floral Shoppe* (Ramona Xavier) in December 2011. Occupy protestors entered Zuccotti Park in New York City on September 17, 2011.

The debatable connection between vaporwave and an ideology critique of capitalism is made explicit by Ramona Xavier (also known as Macintosh Plus/Vektroid) when she describes a defining memory from her childhood wherein she watched her father become depressed under the working conditions he experienced as a long-time, white-collar employee of Microsoft Corporation (Tanner 77). And yet, one need not go far to find an example within the genre that undermines Xavier's political critique about the numbing effects of corporate culture under capitalism. Daniel Lopatin, who has already left behind his experiments in vaporwave to work in the popular music and entertainment industry contradicts Xavier's artistic message. Lopatin's work after *Eccojams Vol. 1*, included changing his artist name to Oneohtrix Point Never and selling music and merchandise online in a manner indistinguishable from any other radio-friendly recording artist. He also moved away from the sample-heavy techniques of vaporwave. For Lopatin, vaporwave was an unambiguous celebration of the aesthetics of the internet's infancy. When prompted in a 2018 interview by his interlocutor's disaffected statement "the internet is boring now," Lopatin replies:

I think Web 2.0 was the beginning of the homogenization of the internet where everything had been templated. It's content management driven and just a giant pasteurization complex. Everything looks the same. All websites look the same. (Pemberton)

Unlike Xavier (born 1992), Lopatin (born 1982) views the nascent internet as a short-lived, now lost, golden age. Lopatin is referring to the nearly ubiquitous use of algorithms to curate content for users today such that the internet has been effectively reduced to a handful of social media platforms that aggregate content. What is not obvious to many users is the content that the algorithm *doesn't* deliver to the user, resulting in information bubbles and an internet divided and distributed by a few large companies. Users are consumers to be targeted for marketing and politically motivated misinformation campaigns. Where Xavier might understand the terms "user" and "consumer" to be synonymous based on her generalized contempt for technology companies like Microsoft, Lopatin waxes elegiac about a time when the difference was meaningful. In the same interview, he adds:

Just look at the history of the internet. It's oriented around hyperlinks, text. Even video games. The first adventure games basically dealt with poetry. As we moved away from that, towards the individual-oriented way of navigating the internet, we lost the ability to dream that way—in stories and ideas. (Pemberton)

For Lopatin, if there is a critique of capitalism to be made, it is not of actually existing capitalism of the late twentieth century, which was, in his view, free, open, and full of possibilities, but rather the critique should be of the monopolization efforts of large tech corporations in the early twenty first century. Complicating Lopatin's position that vaporwave is not resistant to or critical of capitalist mechanisms, a significant amount of vaporwave music was and still is released anonymously/pseudonymously and for free on platforms like Reddit, Tumblr, SoundCloud, and Bandcamp ("Mixing It" 74, 79). As one

can surmise from the fact that they often release their songs at no charge, vaporwave artists are not wont to pay royalties to the publishers of the music samples they use in their works, and this adds credence to the argument that vaporwave's creation and distribution methods do tend to subvert structures of capitalist exchange generally; whether this is intended as a political statement or merely a coincidental result of the folk-art/do-it-yourself nature of its production and distribution, however, will depend on the specific artist and typically won't be determinable from the well-wrought vaporwave song itself.

What is left of art after the unfulfilled promise of critique as seems to be the case with vaporwave? The etymology of the name "vaporwave" may be a clue. The genre has been connected to the idea of *vaporware*, a term that is almost as old as the internet itself¹⁶ (Born and Haworth "Mixing It" 79; Harper "Comment"). Vaporware is any product (often computer software or hardware) that is publicized or announced by a company but is never developed, released, or that arrives significantly delayed to market. Harper adds to this definition that vaporware also includes deliberately fraudulent announcements of future products as a public relations strategy in an effort to appear as industry leaders in the highly competitive computer technologies market (Harper). Understood this way, the vaporwave aesthetic is drawing attention to the stylistic residue of the excitement and promise that accompanied the advent of the internet, much of which turned out to be overly optimistic and far more problematic than technology corporations once augured.

¹⁶ The OED puts the earliest usage in 1983.

Vaporwave artists manipulate and reassemble the cultural signifiers that are reflexively dredged up from the various corners of the internet itself by other members of the online community of vaporwave artist-producers (Born and Haworth 79, 81). Since the internet acts like its own time-capsule, leaving a record of itself as it is being invented, Tanner calls the sounds and images that comprise vaporwave art “digital ghosts” (10). Another way to think of these ghosts are as the ambient materials that become available for artistic creation. But the vaporwave artist is not reassembling this material in a way to be made to speak with a clear or “closed” rhetorical message. There is no performatively transferrable subject position with which a listener might presume access or identification. This subjective ambiguity is also rendered mimetically by what vaporwave artist Robin Burnett (also known as Internet Club) describes as a sonic quality of “fogged-out environments—places where everything is obfuscated and uncertain” (Harper). The vapor of vaporwave, is the affective haze left after the already dissipating mirages of past cultural artifacts are surfaced from the recesses of the internet and re-presented in the knowing distance between past and present.

In *Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale* the roles of ghosts are played largely by literary allusions, not so much as allusions to the works or their ideas themselves, but rather like vaporwave’s digital ghosts, as a result of my inability to keep them and what they might suggest from coming (nostalgically, admiringly) to mind, even as they disrupt or undermine my illusion while writing a poem of my being at the helm as author. For example, in “What If, Very Slowly. . .” there appears mention of Daphne. This appearance is like O’ Hara’s oranges in “Why I Am Not a Painter,” and came to my mind because of an earlier version of my title for the poem that described a person turning into

a plant. Daphne is mentioned in one line and has almost nothing to do with the rest of the poem, since the rest of the poem is not an exploration of the premise of the title.¹⁷ To edit Daphne out of the poem, or else to revise the poem to make more use of the allusion, might be the common-sense approach to take, but having once occurred to me and having written it down, for some reason “Daphne” had come to feel essential to what this poem was in the moment and what it has come to be. I don’t think I would be able to recognize the poem anymore without it. By contrast, the longer version of the title, despite it acting as a kind of catalyst for the composition as a whole, I ultimately determined not to be essential. Allusions that operate in this manner are more like ghosts because they lack the intention of a proper allusion as a product of literary craft. Similar ghosts, meaning the reductive treatment of literary allusion as ambient parlance, can be seen in my manuscript in “Quantum Fruit for a Belle” (line 2), “Definitely Contingent” (epigraph), and “Freshman Comp Post-Anthropocene” (lines 5, 13), among others. Like the digital ghosts of vaporwave, these are references that act as cultural mirages in the recesses of my memories of writing and re-writing poems. Across the three poems I’ve just mentioned, for example, one might identify references to René Magritte, the Christmas season (which has ballooned to become a retail and commercial focus for a quarter of the calendar year), the biblical figure Onan, the astrological sign Pisces, the poet Robert Duncan, the mythological Cretan king Minos, Plato’s allegory of the cave, the concept of *clinamen* (as Epicurean concept or generally as a synonym for bias or inclination towards something), Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Wallace

¹⁷ I fell into the habit some years ago, after struggling with titling my poems, of writing titles first, as a kind of standalone poem. I keep a number of documents saved with only these titles appearing at the top of the page. I (sometimes) return later on and am able to think of a poem that could go with the title. It doesn’t always work out but, for me, it’s more rewarding than the inverse.

Steven's "Anecdote of the Jar," the Chinese concept of wu wei. These examples act as a received, shared cultural shorthand for the aesthetics of previous and current eras that accrue their mental impressions discordantly as so much debris to be negotiated or navigated in the activity of writing.

Vaporwave is unusual as a genre because it depends upon the peculiarity of actually existing technocapitalism of the 1980s and '90s. It's treatment of the "low" art of this era, by representing it through the sonic equivalent of a funhouse mirror, relies on the contemporaneous increase of audio production software for home/amateur use and is, therefore, not readily applied to other cultures and time periods. This is also what makes vaporwave more than just a send-up or parody of the campiness of mass culture in a given era. Applying the audio manipulation techniques (sampling, screwing, pitching, etc.) to Harlem Renaissance era Jazz or K-Pop in the 2010s results in a fundamental incongruity. Vaporwave uses both the internet and the early twenty-first century subcultural enclaves it gives rise to (like online forums for fans of electronic music) as artistic medium. Because it makes use of one of actually existing capitalism's fulfilled promises (the internet and personal computing) to critique capitalism, vaporwave can be understood as a cleaning out of the bilge water of fragmented cultural memory. Its artists scour the internet as amateur digital archaeologists and anthropologists to find the remains of a very recently lost civilization. They may also collect physical media like cassettes and VHS tapes to digitize and use in their works, resulting in the addition of even more once-obscure media to the digital archives. Visual artists in the vaporwave style, in their combination of the visual aesthetics of 1980s and '90s television and corporate culture, signify the labor of this amateur digital archaeology by adding to their

visual collages images of Greek and Roman busts and architecture, as seen in the album art for *Floral Shoppe*.

An important difference that separates vaporwave from other musical genres is its inherent inability to evolve in the way a genre like blues did in the twentieth century. Nor can it be reinvented or revived as is the case for pop genres like disco. Since vaporwave's ambiguous critique is heavily reliant upon the listener having actually understood and experienced the way its cultural artifacts were circulated during the time period in question (1980s and '90s), it is a problematic critique that, like its namesake concept of vaporware, is interminably delayed and obsolete on arrival.

Vaporwave intentionally draws heavily on the "low" art of late twentieth century consumerism, that which was designed to be least offensive and most anaesthetizing. This low art would have qualified as kitsch even to its contemporary audiences. Vaporwave traffics in the nostalgia of kitsch and isn't stating anything that anyone who lived through the era didn't know at the time. The genre draws attention to past kitsch for being kitsch and creates enough ironic distance in the idiosyncrasies of its performance that the music can also seem campy. As the found materials of vaporwave are distorted and manipulated, they vacillate between these two aesthetic states and suspend the listener over (if not dropping them freefall into) a kitsch-camp valley. This valley is haunted by a critique that never arrives and an enjoyment that, if it comes at all, is excessively self-aware and riddled with anxiety. Vaporwave musical aesthetics are like that of the ghosts of a self-assured cultural moment that now wander the virtual halls of the internet looking for its lost audience.

Ambient language poetics likewise accepts the kind of haunting ambiguity found in vaporwave's supposed cultural critique. The ambiguity of ambient language poetics results from the manipulation and distortion of accumulated fragments of language circulating about the poet's conscious and unconscious mental processes—ambient language poetics is like a psychic audio production software itself. To treat language as ambient material in the activity of writing and reading poetry is to resist what Cleanth Brooks dubbed “the heresy of paraphrase” from the position of the writer, but it is also to suspend as long as possible a visceral aversion to the inclusion of language that is ambiguous, obfuscating, ironic, kitschy, campy, self-aware, anxiety-inducing. For example, a poem like “The Low Dead Cry Out, or Save Me a Seat I’ll Be There in 5, OMW!” draws on text message short hand and the kitsch of Saturday morning cartoons as vehicles to sell toys and other merchandise. This poem in particular is like a knock off-action-figure collectible from an alternate reality in which Comte de Lautréamont’s Maldoror character was adapted into a children’s cartoon or a comic book. Other of my poems like “Bat Sonnet” and “There Are All of You Joshua,” traffic in the campiness of poems that appropriate flora and fauna to fabricate a tone of epiphanic or prophetic insight, which the poems knowingly fall short of in keeping with ambient language poetics. When this appropriation is attempted in a sincere effort to capture and administer natural imagery, it takes the form of a rhetorical strategy Timothy Morton calls “ecomimesis.”

Keeping it Real: The Ambient Poetics of Ecomimesis

Ambient poetics is an array of literary techniques that attempt to render for a reader a sense of an environment or surrounding world (Morton 22). An understanding

and awareness of how ambient poetics achieves its effects can, according to Morton, help close-readers keep track of the ways ecomimesis, or ‘nature writing’ as Morton sometimes refers to it, invents and presents nature and the different ideological positions that may be inscribed in this encoding (3). Poet and scholar Joshua Corey writes that Morton’s ambient poetics is “a form of environmental art that deliberately renders unstable the figure and ground, signifier and signified” (Duncan’s *Visionary* 374). The instability Corey refers to amounts to the affordance of a fantasy space Morton calls ambience—that space between the subject and object, the world and how it is rendered (Morton 67). Morton’s ultimate objective for outlining what he calls ambient poetics is to lay the groundwork for an updated ecocritique, a way of writing and thinking about ecology that is equipped to account for what he believes to be problematic ideologies that are reproduced by various attempts to render nature. In this way Morton’s ecocritique is not just a critique of that which is altering ecological systems in ways that are inhospitable to most life on Earth, it is also a critique of this critique. One of the central targets of this ecocritique is ecomimesis.

Ecomimesis is the rhetorical technique of so-called nature writing that seeks to bypass aesthetic interference and textuality itself to represent something called “Nature” directly (without mediation) to the reader. Morton says the goal of ecomimesis is to “rupture the aesthetic distance, to break down the subject-object dualism, to convince us that we belong to this world.” But this goal is not an achievable one, and “the result,” he says, “is to reinforce the aesthetic distance” (Morton 135). The more one describes nature in order to bring it from the background to the foreground—the more the writer attempts to bottle and deliver nature to the reader—the less natural nature becomes. Corey, once

again, helps illuminate Morton's term: "The structure of ecomimesis manifests a simplistic version of pastoral ideology that forecloses Barthes' 'plurality' in the name of singular, authentic encounter with nature that effaces the role of language" (Corey 374). In other words, ecomimesis is an attempt to present nature in the raw, as seamless, unfiltered, objective, and not open to interpretation. Alas, ecomimesis is not only ineffective because it fails to bring a reader into immediate contact with their environment (there remains at least the medium of the work of art itself), it is counter-productive to the goals of ecological writing in its invention of nature as a separate object, out there, that human subjects must work to connect with (or save or conserve) rather than cultivating an awareness that, whatever nature might be, one is always already involved in it.

The quintessential mode of ecomimesis is what Morton refers to as "ecorhapsody." An example of ecorhapsody can be found as the very beginning of the introduction to this essay. Ecorhapsody is marked by an explicit or implied "as I write." The rhetorical technique involves a writer ostensibly recording a series of images from an actually existing environment and presenting them in a kind of litany or metonymic recitation to evoke the sense of a shared locality between reader and writer. The introduction to this essay could be considered a particularly weak form of ecomimesis, because the equivocating language ("more or less," "seems to be") further undermines the environmental fiction.

Since ambient language poetics does not emphasize rendering particular environments, let alone the Environment (nor is it centered on the conjuring of atmospheres and moods), a fair question might be "why start an essay about ambient

language poetics with ecorhapsody?" The first reason is to make a good faith gesture to emphasize that ambient language poetics is not an attempt to annul the diversified poetics practiced today and in past eras. It is not a reactionary poetics that says we must stop writing descriptively about our surroundings or cease reporting on lived experience. Second, and more important for adopting the attitudes of ambient language poetics, the introduction presents ecorhapsody as a kind of kitsch in Morton's sense of the term, as an enjoyment object of another, who might be, in the case of poetry with an audience, the reader. Ecorhapsody is a familiar rhetorical mode and is not far from where many readers might begin their thinking about the term ambient. Either the reader suspends all disbelief and participates in the fiction of the ecorhapsody, or the reader can recognize it for its kitchiness, or some mixture of both. The point being, the only place one can begin an introduction is, definitionally, at a point of an other's recognition. An introduction is an attempt to meet the reader "half way" on the transom of the essay, which is itself a simulated environment. Likewise, Morton says almost all texts are a form of weak ecomimesis (79), and this point is consistent with ambient language poetics.

The poetics articulated in this essay admits Morton's ambient poetics—the poetics of rendering environments—for what they are. Ambient language poetics is not meant as a corrective to Morton's systematic analysis. Furthermore, ambient language poetics is an inclusive poetics, and as such, to exclude or condemn other poetics would be inconsistent. It is an articulation of possibility and permission for the making of poetry, not an attempt to make dissimilar or mutually exclusive poetics cohere. However, to treat with ambient language poetics is to understand that even strong ecorhapsody is ultimately no more representational than, say, Jackson Pollock's action paintings. Any perceived

resemblance to a real experience or environment behind or below the work of art itself is accidental, that is, non-purposive *and* marked by a deviation or distortion inherent to the work of art. Ambient poetics, by contrast, is almost a redundancy if one subscribes to the popular usage of the term “poet” to mean “one who is skilled at accurately rendering environments and experiences of the real through language.” In the film *Contact* (1997), for example, after traveling through a wormhole and finding herself gazing first-hand upon an entire galaxy, this popular sense of “poet” is what Jodie Foster’s character, Dr. Arroway, means when she says, “No words to describe it. Poetry. They should have sent a poet.” A poet would have been equally useless, because poetry, according to ambient language poetics, cannot approximate the being there, no matter how prodigious the poet’s vocabulary or sophisticated their rhetorical techniques.

To conceive of a poet as a renderer of environments is to think of the poet in the image of the Aeolian harp, a passive instrument through which the unread and unsayable real is made legible/audible. Morton connects this function of the poet to an analysis of labor under capital:

“As I write”: the narrator becomes an Aeolian harp, a conduit. The narrator is plugged directly into the world, receiving its reality like paper receiving ink: ecorhapsody. This condition is more like being a worker in a factory (or a machine in one) than it is like being an artisan or boss. The worker receives an unfinished, fragmentary product and does what he or she can to complete it. Given the division of labor, he or she is a temporary stage in the onward flow of commodity parts and a necessary tool in the machine that creates value. (134)

Despite the inherently transformational role played by laborer and equipment in turning raw materials into commodity objects, the analogous poet of ecomimesis attempts to background themselves in order to foreground their surroundings, which are produced by the labor of the poem. Sociologist Vince Carducci describes the Aeolian poet of Morton’s

ambient poetics as “a self-effaced medium in both the mystical and the aesthetic sense” (637). Thus, the Aeolian is always representational, however abstracted or subjectively mediated. This is why Carducci can claim that the example par excellence of ecomimesis in visual art is Impressionist painting, wherein what is rendered is not an objective, photo-realistic image so much as a moment of subjective perception by the artist precisely delivered (642). In contrast to ecomimesis is art that tends to emphasize its own mediation, e.g. collage, montage, bricolage. The incessant materiality of Picasso’s cubist works and the writings of Gertrude Stein may come to mind here, as do the works gathered under the banner of Language poetry. In the distinction between this type of highly mediated approach and that of ecomimesis, ambient language poetics hews much closer to work that stresses its own medium and artifice. Indeed, the language of ambient language poetics is an attempt to position it in this avant-garde tradition, as a post-Language poetic. As such, ambient language poetics doesn’t take representationalism all that seriously, not even as representation distorted by subjective processes, not even as an approximation. The poem never comes close to saying anything about what is the case.

If Impressionism is analogous to ecomimesis, then the analog of ambient language poetics from visual art is abstract expressionist painting, which generally does not involve attempts to represent how an emotion/experience appears. In fact, it’s hard to say abstract expressionism is representational in a meaningful way if that which it expresses is at best unbridgeably limited to the subject position of the artist as something circumstantial, unconscious, or spontaneous. Much abstract expressionist work doesn’t claim “you and I share an understanding of such and such subject matter, and this is what it is like.” The fact that Pollock numbered his action paintings, for example, rather than

give them descriptive titles, contributes, however slightly, to the disruption of the representationalist interpretation of these works by a viewer. Likewise, ambient language poetics is nonrepresentational in that it doesn't call for an attempt to render a world at all.

In *Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale*, the final poem of the collection, "Double Helix Radio," eschews rendering images or representations of physical spaces beyond the page. Without an identifiable speaker (except for line 11, which I can only read as a lyric speaker in the way an echo is the same as a voice) to tie the separate lines into some kind of closing commentary on the poems that precede it, everything is reduced to distraction. The poem is carved out of the noisiness of language, its incessant rattling around in the mind's ear in lieu of thought. Whereas the poem "Could the Mimosa Pudica Interpret Nothing" proceeds from line one as an indefinite pronoun reference, "Whatever it comes to be it'll start," without bothering to identify a topic or subject matter to act as a logical gravity with which to hold itself together. And "Weather Balloon Playlist 3" is a romp or a rap through a succession of simulated observations—simulated because there is nothing to which a real observation corresponds. The poem deploys the sonic aesthetic of ideas, of insight, which does not mean it takes the place of insight, nor that something cannot be found to which pieces of the poem observationally correspond. Rather, it performatively attempts to arrive as something like insight through the back door of aesthetics. The poem doesn't indulge in pabulum or platitude, which is one kind of aesthetic of insight. Instead this third movement of the "Weather Balloon Playlist" acts as a nest of unfertilized language, awaiting an ever-looming reader's conceptual fertilization. It is a poem reduced to the anticipation of its own viability of becoming. Ambient language poetics cannot foreclose on or deny the possibility of a representational interpretation by

the reader. Any reader attuned to ambient language poetics, however, would be hesitant to engage a poem primarily as an Aeolian harp. This kind of reader is alluded to by Keats' reminder by way of his virtual ventriloquy of the Grecian urn. Everything that might be beyond or behind aesthetics is on a need to know basis and, according to the Grecian urn, nobody needs to know. Indeed, if we were to read the urn as a dispersed subject position capable of speech—resulting from the distillation of material examples (extant or otherwise) of Grecian urns, art history, poetics, John Keats the poet, the rhetorical speaker of the poem, and roughly two hundred years of interpretive critique—its valediction anticipates much of what I am here hopeful to articulate with ambient language poetics.

Morton's ambient poetics and the ambient language poetics described in this essay are not antithetical or mutually exclusive, but as poetics they differ in their focus. Morton's ambient poetics renders environments and helps us read environmentality. Ambient language poetics is a way to think about language as non-representational ambient material when making a poem. Such poems may or may not render environments with imagery or ecorhapsody, but their existence as poems makes them environments unto themselves and therefore thinkable in terms of Morton's ambient poetics. The difference is that, again, Morton's concern is with a work's ambience, its sense of environmental representation, mine is with the poet's approach to their artistic medium as non-representational, raw, ecological material.

Easy, Relaxing, Boring, Forgettable: Tan Lin's Ambient Stylistics

In contrast to Morton's ambient poetics, Tan Lin's ambient stylistics is more akin to ambient language poetics because it is primarily an approach to making poetry rather

than analyzing it. Morton's poetic is for the critic first. At the risk of oversimplifying, we can understand that the critic's sense of a poetic seeks to answer the question, "how does a poem work?" while the poet asks "what might a poem do?" Morton articulates in the first chapter of *Ecology Without Nature* an account of how texts have long attempted to render environments but then goes on in the latter half of his book to suggest generally that these writers perhaps ought not to have bothered, because of ecomimesis' consequence of further divorcing readers from their environments as a result of its tendency to efface artifice. Lin's ambient stylistics is not a systematically articulated poetic in the same fashion as Morton's. It is a poetic that shares a name¹⁸ with the working title of his conceptual poem *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary: 2004 The Joy of Cooking* and his ars poetica that appears in the literary journal *Conjunctions* in 2000 called "Ambient Stylistics." Ambient stylistics is Lin's conceptual aesthetic that probes and reflects on what literary critic and poet Jennifer Scappettone has called the "dregs of our cultivated inattention" (66). The aim of this cultivation of inattention is to transpose background and foreground. When the text is boring, to use Lin's word, he is able to draw reader's attention toward the social and material construction of the poetry book itself.

In his ars poetica for *Conjunctions*, Lin's text proceeds by way of the familiar patterns of anecdote and aphorism. While his poetic aphorisms are constructed as prescriptions of what poetry ought to be like, the possibility for a dogmatic adherence to

¹⁸ In her essay "Versus Seamlessness: Architectonics of Pseudocomplicity in Tan Lin's Ambient Poetics," Jennifer Scappettone refers to Lin's aesthetic as "ambient poetics," citing Morton's concept. Because Lin already used the phrase "ambient stylistics" and to avoid conflating Morton's notion of ecomimesis with Lin's poetic intervention in how one poet/reader relates to their textual environments, I will continue to reserve "ambient poetics" for Morton's theory of ecomimesis, and "ambient stylistics" for Lin's aesthetics of ambient reading.

these principles is undermined by their own abstraction and contradiction. For instance: “No one should remember a poem or a novel, especially the person who wrote it” (“Ambient Stylistics” 129). Another: “Poetry need not say anything important or humanly meaningful, it should merely evoke a mood. That mood resembles the sound of a sunset” (141). This kind of abstracted and oblique recommendation for thinking about and making poetry is not uncommon for poets. It may bring to mind some of Wallace Stevens’s aphorisms like “money is a kind of poetry,” (Stevens 973) and “poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush” (Stevens 974), or the ordered list of conceptual rules in Kerouac’s “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose,” which include recommendations like “accept loss forever,” and “blow as deep as you want to blow” (*Heaven & Other Poems*). In “Ambient Stylistics,” however, Lin affects an even, processional, mild rhythm with his aphoristic sentences. Unlike the examples of aphoristic cataloguing like Stevens and Kerouac, Lin’s sentences conceptually repeat, like the repeating print of wallpaper. The text becomes something one flips through or jumps around in. The text doesn’t progress or develop. At times it seems narrative but always plotless and static. It maintains a steady beat like that of disco music, which Lin says is “designed to be immediately forgettable” (“Ambient Stylistics” 128).

In many ways Lin’s “Ambient Stylistics” anticipates a musical genre like vaporwave for its treatment of the cultural trappings of contemporary life and its engagement with the language of environments historical and emergent such as the various internets. While his work renders textual environments, it also disrupts the spell of its peculiar ecomimesis. Instead of lulling a reader into a textual environment solely to effect calm and space to think, following Eno, Lin’s poetry draws a reader’s attention to

the cracks, seams, and inconsistencies of the ambient material surrounding the reader and the paratext surrounding a text as the work appropriates and provokes familiar modes of (in)attention.

In an introduction to Lin's work for *Boston Review*, Charles Bernstein describes the poems as "relaxing," while cautioning the reader that they "are not meditative poems but temporal processes cast into words: permeable, open, meandering" ("Poet's Sampler"). The prose of "Ambient Stylistics" is largely in the style of recounted personal anecdotes, summaries of stories read or overheard about celebrities, and superficial reflection upon popular cultural references such as Wes Anderson's film *Rushmore*, Gloria Gaynor's hit song "I Will Survive," and the band Chicago. Many of which feel more like associative musings than illustrative examples or citational evidence for any of his poetic claims. The reference to *Rushmore*, for example, is simply a statement that the speaker went alone to the theater to see the film ("Ambient Stylistics" 138). Likewise, the poem only mentions "I Will Survive" to say it was aptly titled because it was the only song ever awarded a Grammy for "best disco recording," as the honor was retired the year after its inauguration ("Ambient Stylistics" 128). Indeed, some of the passages bring to mind Frank O'Hara's poetics of personism, at least in that they have a quality of sounding like overheard conversation intended for a more intimate audience, a diary, a friend, or a therapist.

The predominating effect of ambient stylistics seems to be to encourage the reader to wander away from the page, to day dream about something else, to "space out" in a manner of speaking, because the text is too boring to keep the reader's full and rapt attention. In case Lin's stories become too stimulating, he is sure to include regular

reminders by way of aphorism to the reader that they could be doing something far more interesting. This isn't self-deprecating nihilism; instead, it is a subversion of poetic taste with a point. Some of the most consequential texts are the ones that we aren't aware we are reading or the ones that prepare us to read a particular way rather than the ones that overwhelm with artifice and stir "within" strong emotional responses. When a speaker (there seems to be multiple, and they are often difficult to equate to Lin himself) states in "Ambient Stylistics" that "a great poem is more boring than the act of reading itself" (131) or "poetry should not be interesting, it should hold out the potential to be very insipid" (141), they are self-consciously insisting on an impossible kind of ecomimesis. That is, an accomplished poem would be as boring and (in)consequential as reality itself. However, "Ambient Stylistics" stops very short of achieving the status of the perfectly forgettable; it's far too thoughtful and intentional. It constantly draws attention to its own status as textual object, as a reading environment for reading environments. Lin's *ars poetica* may succeed as an introduction to ambient stylistics, but it is itself a weak enactment of them.

Speaking to the incongruity of Lin's calling for a boring, forgettable poetry while designing a book that seems to buck familiar textual conventions, Jeff T. Johnson argues in his review of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* that "The most persistent mode of [Lin's] book is paradox, if not irony, as the text continually does the opposite of what it says." Though the aphorisms and didactic moments seem to disrupt the passive and absorptive reading habits that Language poets resisted in their work, some of which have been notably elucidated in Bernstein's essay-poem "Artifice of Absorption," the art object that is Lin's work draws a reader's attention to many of the same textual and material matters

of the work itself in a manner reminiscent of the techniques deployed by Language poets Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, Clark Coolidge, et al.

The poetic techniques one often finds among epitomical Language poetry includes the calculated use of white space, concern for the physical boundaries of the book with careful attention to the physical limits of the page, the layout of the text and on which pages, associative and paratactic arrangement of ideas, and a tendency to incorporate appropriated or found text and images. In particular, Hejinian's work in *My Life* is a remarkable example of the ambient language of autobiography. Lyrical and deeply personal, the poems draw on the same sort of personal materials from which most good and bad confessional work draws. Yet, the familiar narrativity of autobiography, that anecdotal procedure of much autobiography, is absent or obscured. *My Life* shows a remembering mind fully immersed in a continuum of language from past and present and future. Instead of a transparent picture through which a reader may glimpse a representation of Hejinian's life, the reader is met by a lived and alive writing mind such that the poems are not so much a mere retelling of experiences as much as they are alive and perambulating amidst and via language.

The first obvious example of appropriated text in Lin's book, is the inclusion of a foreword written by Laura Riding Jackson, though it is, of course, not a foreword written for Lin's book. In this way, the work regularly calls attention to its own assemblage while never completely co-opting or assimilating its found materials into the metaobject of a book in a recognizable way. Consider, as another example of self-aware assembly, that the very title of the work mutates from page to page. Dan Visel, editor of the poetry blog *With Hidden Noise*, in his review of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, notes that there are

at least six different titles for the book. The front cover bears the title *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary: 2004 The Joy of Cooking*. The first title page lists the title *Seven Controlled Vocabularies 2004 [Airport Novel Musical Poem Painting Theory Film Photo Landscape]*. On the next page the title appears differently with the Library of Congress information as *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, The Joy of Cooking: Airport Novel Musical Poem Painting Film Photo Hallucination Landscape / Tan Lin (7CV¹⁹)*. And so on, with a couple more title pages following these. This has the effect of not only calling attention to the form of the book and its process of construction through what might be understood as revised working titles, but also undermines claims that appear in the text such as, “One should never know one is reading a book when one is reading it” (100). It is difficult at any point for the reader to forget they are reading a book precisely because 7CV continually fails to operate as a reader expects a book to operate. Because so much of the process of reading is frustrated by textual distortions and idiosyncrasies, it’s just as difficult to say that what a reader is doing with the book can be best described as reading at all.

The disruptive incongruities and self-referentiality of the text of 7CV is counterposed to passages that induce an easier, more absorptive reading. For example, a prosaic passage on the top of page 127 reads like a reflective essay on superstores such as Wal-Mart and their inventory management systems. It occupies most of the page, but at the bottom, one finds a bracketed list of terms: “[Family Vacation, Infancy, Little

¹⁹ From this point forward, I will use the abbreviation 7CV in this essay to refer to the work because it is how Lin has insisted it be referenced during interviews and how literary critics like Jennifer Scappettone refer to the work. Lin has also explained his preference for the abbreviation owing to the fact that it further encodes information about the work in another level of abstraction, itself operating as a kind of metadata title. See Lin’s 2012 interview with Chris Alexander in Jacket2 titled “Writing as metadata container.”

League, Childhood, Preparatory School, PTA, Girl Scouts, School Picnic, Home Ec, Shop]” (127). The list resembles SEO²⁰ tags, which are phrases explicitly listed in the HTML²¹ code of a website to help search engine web crawlers index websites. In other words, they are keywords that help search engines find and return relevant websites when a user runs a search. That this list of terms on the bottom of page 127 might be interpreted as SEO tags is helped by its physical proximity on the page to a snippet of computer code:

```
<META name=“description” content=“This is description field”>
```

```
<meta name=“keywords” content=“about, friends, family”>
```

Just above this code snippet and below the bracketed list of terms, in bolded font, appears the words “PHP Code” as if to label what the code snippet is an example of (127). As opposed to a page that lulls a reader into an absorbed attention, this page raises a lot of questions about its own architecture and what its text is supposed to be referencing. The interpretive challenge here is not a question of accessing or understanding what the text is saying, because if one continues to close read in search of answers, perhaps referencing computer code manuals in hopes of interpreting the text, the meaning underneath, like a vapor, dissipates further. The code snippet, it turns out, is not an example of PHP²² code at all, but of HTML. If the speaker of this passage is aware of this, then the words “PHP Code” cannot be a label. Instead it might be a place holder with an implied meaning of

²⁰ Search engine optimization.

²¹ HyperText Markup Language

²² “PHP: HyperText Preprocessor” (recursive acronym) is a general-purpose scripting language that is embeddable within HTML code but is not itself part of HTML. PHP directs web browsers to do something specific like retrieve pieces of data or other code from a server, and HTML is akin to formatting and citation guidelines from the Modern Language Association as it designates what should be visible or not, where on the page an asset should appear, and in what order the web browser should run any programming scripts it needs to. While PHP and HTML are both included in most websites’ code (among other web languages), only HTML uses the <meta> tag.

something like “imagine a snippet of PHP code appearing in this position on the page.”

Such a directive is something not every reader will be able to easily comply with, nor is it clear at this level of close reading what the incentive would be for a reader to bother with this amount of collaborative and interpretative activity.

The HTML code snippet quoted above structurally mirrors the bracketed list of terms that precede it and define some possibly useful information for the web browser about the contents of the web page. Translated into English prose it means something like, “If some programming script queries a description of this website, then return verbatim: ‘This is description field,’ and if the script requests the searchable keywords for this page, then return verbatim: ‘about, family, friends.’” This segment of code is merely a way to bracket off information. It is paratext that is rarely seen and often ignored but is always attached to any text that appears on the internet. Yet even this code is written in a non-normative way. The value of the “content” in the first metadata tag should, according to search engine optimization best practices (and commonsense), be a straightforward description of the contents, such as “blog about Wal-Mart.” Instead, the description here, “This is description field,” is unusably self-referential. Similarly, included in the list of designated keywords on the next line, in the second metadata tag, is the word “about,” which is a textual redundancy of the code’s structure and is the same as saying the content of the page is about “about” and “friends” and “family.” If the bracketed list of terms that appears on page 127 resembles a list of SEO tags related to a web page presenting some generalized ideas about “friends and family,” they are poor keyword descriptors for this page’s contents. Just as the book in which this code snippet appears is a strange example of HTML, so 7CV is a strange example of a book. Likewise, if the

terms in the bracketed list are SEO tags, they must be for another page or for a section of the page that is not visible to the end user (reader), to say nothing about the fact that the page in question is not a web page at all but a page from the print version of the book.

When a web designer makes a mistake in their code (e.g. omitting an equals sign or a closing parenthesis) and the page is loaded by a web browser, a common consequence of that bad code (if the page loads at all) is that a section of code intended to be invisible to the user becomes visible—it leaks from the background (raw HTML file) into the foreground (web browser’s display). This might occur because the coded text is not recognizable or interpretable by the web browser. Not having any instructions about what else to do with the text, the browser defaults to displaying the text to the screen as typed. The code snippet on page 127 is a visual reminder of the other web-based extensions of 7CV whose existence and distribution depend upon many unseen, unread texts and operations.²³ The inclusion of computer code is an example of an incongruity that may lead a reader to an awareness of the architecture and textual ecology of the book, not as an object that is discrete and relatively stable, but as temporally and spatially (which is also to say relationally) dispersed.

The shifting focus and activity of the reader induced by 7CV’s incongruities is acutely summarized by Scappettone in her description of Lin’s poetic:

Lines at large sampled and reprocessed, released at seemingly random intervals beyond the work’s prose blocks, amalgamate a medium mixed for your reading pleasure or mild irritation—to be soaked up, stared at, ignored, and hopefully forgotten: as noticed or unnoticed as the work of a thermostat “regulat[ing] the room’s energies” (69)

²³ *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* has a lengthy appendix that was once available online as a digital book download through the print-on-demand company Lulu, but it is no longer available at the time of writing this essay.

Here, the echo of Eno's description of ambient music, "ignorable as it is interesting," is difficult to miss. Likewise, in the first pages of his sprawling book, Lin presents something like an artist statement to explicitly draw out the connection further:

What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of literature that didn't have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading. (*Seven Controlled Vocabularies* 16)

To say "ambient soundtrack" is surely to refer to Eno's sense of ambient music as a background music, something one might put on to fill the awkward gaps in conversation during a dinner party, or, like a placemat, demarcate the otherwise uniform space of the dinner table as a place for dining. It's also worth noting that a placemat is not a contemplative object in the same way a work of art, framed and hung for display is. Nor does one often pull down the paintings in the dining room, lay them on the table and then stack plates and silverware on them. Just as a placemat is not a painting, Lin's "literature to be looked at" is not like the calligrams of Guillaume Apollinaire or the concrete poems of Haroldo and Augusto de Campos, which involve some level of visual representation of theme or concept in the rendered literary environment of the poem per se. Literature to be looked at would not ask for reading/interpretation; it is not positioned as message bearer (ἄγγελος). Instead, it renders reading environments and a reading mood, what Lin has referred to as the "ambience of reading" (Alexander). Such an understanding of the literary object makes it difficult to locate the "beyond," the ostensible realm of meaning behind or beneath a text, which the text is responsible for transporting. If such a "beyond" is conceivable in the first place, it must be utterly beyond, to the extent that the

notion of representationalism becomes an absurd frame for understanding the relational causes of the literary object or the relationships between the appropriated text and visual images within the work. Lin's ambient stylistics of *7CV* is to suggest the literary object as a state of affairs of myriad sub-objects, many of which are texts, and some of which are read. This formulation subverts the notion of literary texts as primarily a medium of thought exchange and instead proposes that literature (which, for Lin, is also anything a reader treats as literature) is more like a familiar clutter, such as furniture, wallpaper, placemats. It is something commonplace that evokes a mood that may also provoke some activity or not.

Another way to describe Lin's placemat literature might be "literature that is not primarily a text," if a text is defined to be an object for reading/interpreting. Which is also to say that, for Lin, literature exceeds literacy by operating as a temporal ecological object and where literacy—the various practices and patterns of reading codified by different reading environments—is the foremost of all elements that constitute literature. Lin's *7CV* proposes in such an approach that a literary object, such as a book of poetry, is everything that one reads plus even more text that one has not yet or may never read. For Lin, the work of *7CV* includes paratext like interviews and other secondary literature, including critical writing about *7CV* such as this section of this very essay. The boundaries of the book, and specifically *7CV*, is a central organizing inquiry of Lin's project. His approach is primarily mimetic in that he seeks to reproduce reading environments and their reading practices. In rendering the environment in which literary objects come to be recognized and read, Lin's work accomplishes a literary ecomimesis, but an ecomimesis nonetheless. As Morton argues, the poet of ambient poetics aims to

ultimately deliver to readers unmediated forests and sunsets. 7CV conjures a plethora of reading practices, in turn bringing to mind their reading environments and the contexts in which a reader most regularly encounters a given text. As the reader of ambient poetics is prompted to consider the so-called natural environs, so the reader of Lin's ambient stylistics is prompted to consider the hinterland of the literary, Lin's re-drawn borderlands of the literary object, and the environment of the book itself.

Jennifer Scappettone also describes Lin's work as mimetic and argues for a Modernist frame of understanding of Lin's treatment of the ambient material that comprises a literary object. Though Lin's conceptualism is ostensibly less intimidating than the monumental and sometimes encyclopedic accumulation seen in the works of Stein, Pound, and Eliot, as well as the mid-to-late twentieth century avant-garde writers associated with and adjacent to Language poetry, it approaches the working materials of poetry in a comparable manner (Scappettone 73). Where Lin deviates from his predecessors, however, is in his insistence on the easy-listening quality of ambient music translated from the acoustic to the textual medias. In making this very point, Scappettone writes, "Lin claims to offer up a page across which prevailing 'irritants and relaxants' merge," rendering the book of poetry "analogous to that of the streaming media soaking us lately" (73). 7CV also subverts the notion of the book as an object in the naïve realist sense, as content bound between a front and back cover, by instead treating it as a dispersed relational amalgamation of other texts, paratexts, con-texts, and collaborative authorship. This collaboration, Lin claims, is another deviation from his avant-garde predecessors because it "dispenses with more strict notions of aesthetic autonomy" (Alexander). One presumes from such a claim, that Lin understands 7CV to be multiply

and anonymously authored. Yet, the assertion is a difficult one to defend as it is only Lin who is being interviewed about his creative design for the project which necessarily precedes his unnamed collaborators. If Lin isn't 'aesthetically autonomous' as the author/director of 7CV then I'm not sure what the phrase could mean.

Looking at 7CV through this Modernist lens, one can see that it not only emphasizes the book as of a piece with print and digital media environments, or more specifically, that books just are these environments taking a particular temporary shape and are therefore subject to Morton's analytic of ecomimesis and ambient poetics, but it also deploys the idea of "ambient" to refer to available material for (re)composition. This sense of "ambient" is only partially compatible with ambient language poetics in so far as it says all language is fair game, so to speak, for inclusion in poetry, and that all writing is ambient writing in so far as it makes use of words and phrases that precede the writer and the writing activity. Lin's sense of ambient poetry derives in part from his study of Eliot's "The Waste Land," which Lin considered to be an ambient work because, as Scappettone explains, "it draws upon the material of its environs, themselves resembling more and more a massive trash heap" (69). Understood this way, "The Waste Land," could be considered an ecomimetic project for its rendering of the ecosystems of cultural artifacts, just as 7CV renders an array of reading environments. Yet it is important to note here that this understanding of "ambient" is still limited to that which is found externally to the writing subject (Lin is primarily interested in the reading subject), and it precludes the possibility of conceiving of "ambient" as a *sui generis* prepositional state like "inside" and "outside," and furthermore keeps "ambient" on the "outside" side of the binary—what is ambient is that *within* which one finds oneself (one's container).

One inquiry that follows from the observation that Lin's ambient stylistics is ecomimetic is whether or not his poetic is comparable to ambient poetics' tendency to produce counterproductive representations of the so-called natural environment that further distances it from the kind of mass ecological understanding that Morton argues is necessary to bring about policies that adequately mitigate the effects of anthropogenic climate change. Lin's work doesn't seem to call for readers to change their reading habits, as Lin's insistence on boring literature suggests. It isn't clear to what extent Lin expects readers to contemplate their reading moods and habits; instead, readers merely reproduce these habits. Remember that where "The Waste Land" suggests the figurative image of history as a kind of overgrown landfill, Lin's rhetorical image of literature is that of wallpaper. Although the figurative image of wallpaper suggests something perhaps less abject than a trash heap, it is nevertheless effecting the same kind of managed environmental representation as would any work subject to the critique of Morton's ambient poetics. Therefore, while I must agree with Scappettone's claim that Lin's "soothing" ambient stylistics as seen in 7CV is "effectively indistinguishable from that of manipulation," I am as yet unconvinced of her claim that this manipulation constitutes a "subversive irony" owing to Lin's "literature [that] mimics the way the culture industry performs today so that viewers of it can glean [. . .] some recognition of what's happening [. . .] in other sectors of cultural dissemination" (75). My skepticism of such a claim at this juncture stems from what I find most persuasive about Morton's systematic articulation of ambient poetics, specifically that rendering and representing are not inherently subversive poetic strategies; such strategies can just as easily undermine a poet's rhetorical aims. If Lin's ecomimesis of sectors of the culture industry is meant to

induce readers to more critically attend to how information is disseminated through various channels, it needs to do more than represent these sectors and channels in a dubious way. More to the point, if one of the rhetorical goals of 7CV is to make a reader aware of how a book operates, then to present a book that is barely recognizable as a book forestalls, or at least puts into question, any comparisons made between the peculiar example of a book that is like 7CV or books generally.

At the risk of being reductive, if ambient poetics, as Morton articulates them, involves some expectation that the rendered environments in a piece of writing petitions human readers for concern for the rest of the so-called natural world, which in turn leads, theoretically, to a political urgency (personally or at movement scale) to protect all or part of *the* environment from destructive human activity, then Lin's ambient stylistics' solicited concern is for media/information/reading environments. This concern is not for the conservation of these environments, however, but rather to possibly increase human mastery over them, to encourage better readers, or to increase information literacy. Lin also, as far as I can tell from interviews, never argues that his work is an attempt at a subversive irony, as Scappettone claims (75), or that he has explicit hopes of helping a reader form a rigorous understanding of how information is disseminated.

Any hope that a project like 7CV might positively affect a reader's understanding of how reading practices are codified and information is circulated is further undermined in a context in which phrases like "alternative facts," "fake news," and "misinformation" shape so many readers' understanding of how information is created and spread. Perhaps 7CV is already dated in terms of its artistic and theoretical insights. Especially in online reading environments like Twitter and Facebook, where there seems to be a nearly

unanimous consensus that not everything one reads on these sites is to be trusted. This isn't to say that one person's information literacy is as sophisticated and well-developed as another's, but some readers seem to be largely skeptical and distrustful of most sources of information and simultaneously more convinced than ever of their core beliefs, whereas those with whom one disagrees are in the process of being 'brainwashed,' indoctrinated, or propagandized. Because 7CV operates ecomimetically, to show how a container of information like a book is mutable and dispersed, it encourages an engagement with reading environments that doesn't correlate to reading environments as they are encountered or conceived of in daily life or online. The approximation introduces a distortion that may further distance the reader from the reading environments they most frequent. Twitter is not read by most users as a conceptual poetry project, and 7CV is not read (at least by any of the reviewers or interviewers cited here) as a conduit for salient information in the same way one reads for information online. In a reading environment like Twitter, other user's tweets may often be "misinformation" but one's own tweets are always only free expressions of one's opinion, regardless of the (often under-examined) origins of that opinion.

Lin's work doesn't make much of an intervention into problems related to the spread of inaccurate information or readers' abilities to identify trustworthy sources within a given reading environment, and to be fair, he doesn't claim to. But in the absence of such an intervention, a question emerges: if ambient poetics reveals how the concept of nature is invented and rendered problematically, does 7CV and its ambient stylistics create similarly problematic renderings of reading environments? In other words, does Lin's work create a managed representation of some media environment that

reinforces harmful engagement with media or reading environments? Well, kind of, simply because it emphasizes the activity of reading rather than writing. Just as I can't really describe what one does with 7CV as "reading," I can't describe what Lin has done to produce 7CV as "writing" either. Unlike most poets, Lin has surprisingly little to say about the activity of writing when he is asked in an interview about his writing process. In the interview he gives for the contemporary poetics journal *Jacket2*, he replies to Kristen Gallagher's question about writing process, "Generally, and I don't know why this is so, I write books in a three- or four-month period, then spend years 'repairing' them" (Alexander). Lin follows up by returning the discussion to the idea of reading, and one gets the sense from his full reply—which includes his reading of the character of Nadja in Andre Breton's eponymous novel—that he isn't interested in thinking about writing all that much. Indeed, his response about writing process morphs quickly into a discussion of how one might read 7CV, by "scanning rather than continuous reading for plot" (Alexander). And Lin's final word on writing process in this response is knowingly flippant:

So 7CV is really [...] about the banality and ordinariness that inheres in our read/write lives. I wrote most of the book in that manner. [...] I chose things from the newspaper that pleased me and inserted myself into my reading of them. Isn't this really what most of us do when reading or participating in reading? [...] I tell my students this all the time, reading is easy, just like watching TV. So is writing. (Alexander)

It's clear that Lin understands writing as being continuous with reading. But in keeping the focus on the activity of reading, writing becomes an afterthought, something one does almost automatically, or carelessly, as a result of reading. The composition that results from such reading is of little importance as evidenced in the "banality and ordinariness" Lin ascribes to the most commonplace reading/writing practices as well as his

encouragement that readers skip around and skim the pages of 7CV. He doesn't ask his readers to think much, if at all, about their own writing habits. In framing her question about writing process for Lin, Gallagher says she suspects that much of the writing people do online isn't thought of by them as writing at all (Alexander). Hers is a valid observation that, for some writers, might be disconcerting; but, apparently, it does not trouble Lin, who neither thinks about or discusses much of what is written and collated into 7CV as writing, at least to the extent that writing is just a form of reading that is unworthy of further elaboration or consideration beyond the *feeling* of reading. Lin's response to the question about writing process seems to take for granted that writing just happens automatically. He emphasizes reading and interpretive environments, moods and feelings associated with reading. He asks how one recognizes what they are reading, and how this recognition is encoded into a text.

These are fascinating questions, but here are some others: what about the writers largely (but never singularly) responsible for setting these reading environments into motion? Where do these environments keep coming from? Given that there are so many of these reading environments, each with their own ambience of reading—far more than could ever be read or accounted for—how does a creative writer write in a situation that is so saturated? There is nothing new under the sun, so why bother? How can it be so pleasurable to speak or write, long after anything is being added to the conversation, and especially after?

In contrast to (but not refutation of) Lin's approach with ambient stylistics' emphasis on reading, ambient language poetics emphasizes writing. Its questions, where they appear, have more to do with what happens in those moments of (re)composition

that are then distilled into texts. What is it like to write? How does one know when one is writing or not? Why does one feel compelled to write even when one has nothing to say? Am I myself when I'm writing? Am I myself when I'm not? And these questions aren't necessarily research inquiries or topics to be explored in still more writing, because such efforts are like creating maps to nowhere. They are residual evidence of some underlying anxiety about the ambient positioning of language, it's absurdity, ineffectiveness, inscrutability and inescapability, wildness, mysteriousness, relentlessness, banality, unpredictability...

A Word on the Title "Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale"

It is now appropriate by way of making a few ever-insufficient closing remarks, to say something about the title of the manuscript. The title presents side-by-side two ecologically suggestive, elusive images. The broken dozer has simultaneous resonance with the idealized image of last century's environmental activism: the bulldozer, that symbol of human encroachment upon pure Nature, that will someday fall into disrepair and disuse. The title may also suggest the figure of the dozer, fast asleep during this century's environmentalism's, who is detached from the required holistic, cosmopolitan, systemic critique demanded by the existential crisis climate change poses to humans and planet Earth as we've come to know it. The "broken dozer" may also bear familiar interpretative weight as a metaphor for language generally. If language is a tool to get things done, to socialize, to cooperate, then we are never very far from a slip, a misunderstanding, a misheard word, a lack of context, that betrays its tendency to break down, to fail to impact the world the way we want it to. And the "haunted vale," recalls an even more anachronistic environmentalism, the one of Romantic ecomimesis, the

Arcadian environmentalism that haunts every green space, every geological wonder as much as it may bring to mind the hauntology of vaporwave and its kitsch-camp valley or the sonic lacunae within poems into which the human impulse to make of the world a sensible place rushes like a river through a busted dam. The title points to an ecological pluralism explored through the medium of language, as ecological object(s), as ambient language.

One way of thinking ecology is as an accounting for the particular state of affairs at a given moment at the expense of the shorthand frameworks that elide constitutive relationships necessary for a sufficiently detailed analysis. Yet this eco leads us quickly to an ego. If a notion like a home state of affairs is to be intelligible, it can only be grasped as a state of affairs *for* some organizing central point. In her study of Gertrude Stein and media ecologies, Swedish literary critic Solveig Daugaard writes that Morton's sense of ambient poetics can help us understand the work of Stein as calling for a decentered approach to works of literature, one that asks artists, readers, critics to understand works as dispersed objects within media ecologies.

Stein's *Tender Buttons* builds new, erotic ecologies out of language. Her work engages with the very kind of ecomimetic representation described by Morton, but only insofar as these poems apparently describe or represent the essential nature of these rooms and objects and food. Harryette Mullen approaches Stein's *Tender Buttons* in this representational understanding too, as "idiosyncratic verbal 'portraits' of hats, umbrellas, cups and cushions [that] illuminate, animate, and eroticize the domestic space to which women traditionally have been confined" (x). Yet, what is also rendered are new rooms, new stanzas, built not of brick and mortar but of the sensual experiences of language.

These language rooms, like all rooms, put pressure on the existential seams of where precisely one seems to be continually arriving. A reader transcends physical location/space in *Tender Buttons*, not through supernatural or paranormal means, but the physical medium of language and its semantic and cognitive provocations. And this is also why, to reiterate the opening salvo of this essay, an understanding of ambient language poetics can only begin where one seems to be. As such, I read *Tender Buttons* as a most useful example of ambient language poetics at play.

Mullen's poetry also—as a response to, and therefore what Tan Lin would call a paratextual extension of, Stein's poetry—exemplifies many of the techniques and aesthetics of ambient language poetics. Mullen's title for her collection of early work, *Recyclopedia*, declares itself as an ecopoetic because its recycling of ideas is based upon an ecological understanding of poetics that is not necessarily concerned with surplus carbon as much as it is "transforming surplus cultural information into something unexpected" (vii). This cultural detritus is not waste material for Mullen but the stuff of which poems are made, not as mere avant-garde experiment, but to the making of poetry in the first place, therefore creating poetry that is as playful as it is urgent. In an educational curriculum that aims to introduce ambient language poetics, Mullen's collections, especially her 2002 book *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, ought to be required reading. The very title captures so well the casual intimacy that is possible between language and a languaged mind set afloat, suspended, ambiented.

Ambient language poetics might be one way to think an ecology of words, which is not made of words exclusively. It is Stein's poetics that Dugaard specifically calls ambient and that she compares to Tan Lin's ambient stylistics for their similar resistance

to the “book as fetishized object” (56). In understanding Stein’s work as an ecological poetic, one that isn’t reducible to “nature writing” or green literature, she models, I believe, how ambient language poetics might also be understood as an ecological poetic or an ecopoetic. Dugaard connects Stein’s sense of a surrounding language medium to the work of John Cage:

The silence in Cage’s 4’33 is not silence, it is the sound of the audience collaborating, just as the repetition of Stein’s language is not repetition but an invitation to her readers and collaborators to always connect the marks on the page to the surrounding ecology that lies beyond this page. (429)

What is troubling here from the perspective of ambient language poetics is that this connection to surrounding ecology could easily, through our long-established and continuously reinforced habits of composing and reading poetry, bring us back to rendering, summoning, or referencing an external world through the medium of the poem. But, if we can remember that the literary object is dispersed, and if we can think of the poet as similarly dispersed, we have essentially arrived at ambient language poetics. This poetic tends to produce poetry that might be for something other than interpretation. Writing that isn’t for interpretation or messaging isn’t necessarily writing that can’t be read or that amounts to “nonsense.” Nor is this “uncreative writing” or “unoriginal genius” at play.²⁴ It’s a writing that happens constantly. It is writing that all writers do. One might often find it among the deletions of previous drafts of published works, or in

²⁴ *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* by Kenneth Goldsmith and *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* by Marjorie Perloff both explore the poetics of found texts and materials. The “management” of language or the suggestive “other means” both share a kinship with the disposition called for by ambient language poetics, however Goldsmith aims to eschew or curtail lyricism, contrary to ambient language poetics. Perloff explores the personal within the citational, which is important for ambient language poetics, but she limits the scope of her project to techniques for found or appropriated texts, whereas with ambient language poetics my aim to articulate a broader reach of the poet’s compositional possibilities that includes the newly discovered and playfulness of invented language as well.

the activity of the novice poet listing end-rhymes as they search through sonic permutations until they find one that satisfies. As such, ambient language poetics follows in the traditions of found poetry, aleatoric/chance generated poetry, erasure, automatic writing, Surrealism, Dadaism, Modernist accumulation, error (typo, malapropism, etc.), and brushes up against most avant-garde poetics of the last century in some form or another. It calls for more poetry that explores the radical possibilities of poems without the intent to render reality or communicate truths, in hopes that, instead, poets might make more poems that open up the possibility for us, reader-writers, to notice the kinds of things language does when we're not looking.

PART TWO: Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale

Avant-Garde Nursery Rhyme for Display

If I write a poem, let's say, with line breaks and I use word play
In a catama...catato...panorama...purita...overused, "play."

Like *locomotive* because the previous line is for good reason
Making me think of trains. But as I think on the train

I remember a train I saw in a toy store as a kid. Now I am addled.
The toy store being My. I mean my See-You-On-the-Other-Side Mind.

Don't know really why that train of all trains...why a toy train? *shrug*
What calls on me first. But anyway the *locomotive* all anagrammatic is:

Lo, Eco Vomit
and the anagram is . . .
Cool Motive
and the anagram is . . .

I Loom Covet
and the anagram is . . .
Love Moo Tic
and the anagram is . . .

Me I Lo Coo Tv // and the pome escapes my care happily ever after.
How can anyone say I am not the all way monster of dopey try

new language! Try true so who would bother to explicitly deny it?
And if they never read it, bother to deny it. Or who can say. You, probably.

That's what you have in mind. But you just got here.
And now you want me to remember where it comes from

for you? Like you don't know. Like you weren't born knowing and just
kept on that way more or less until dead. I'm having a very hard time accessing—

Does that make me God? You being so unknowable to me.
Yes well why not say. I'm reading the same things you are. Sure

I've never wept as far as you have. Looking for my place in this
Big dumb world. Nor can we know *their* legendary heads, I bet.

Hobbyhorse Bubaline Micronometer

In Zurich they cheated, went out of their way
to appear chaotic and aleatoric, kentledge, and ungual.

Random is boring, every body knows this, every one.
Meter is classist but rhythm is democratic. Privatize poetry.

Animal means it's aroused or it ain't. Hibernate dream infect.
Ego hides an abbreviated macro-imaginary. My love is a cold titan.

She calls me her little telomere, necessary: may be—been lit
but not unforgettable as if time were not the mere impossibility

of unavoidable messy antic, the consequence of rampaging dissonance.
To a mosquito I am succulent fruit, to the sun an impasse.

Thus no shadow, only policy and attempts to nest. All it takes
is to pretend to comprehend and ye shall not want.

Where there is desire there cannot be consent. Remember
everything anomalous is sacred if by sacred one intends

a heuristic of the rivet. Self-objectification like footsteps
following you up the basement stairs after the lights go out.

There Are All of You, Joshua

a thrust in the wilderness
 decorated with small bayonets

our fruit is mockery in comparison—

 you were born old
flowering white & occasionally

your mutinies are well-aged
 by severe patience
 as all live things must be
green desert souls

let me bring you some water
let me search for your blue shade and sleep

let me hold up arms
in the kingdoms of heaven, at last

Joshua, queer choir—
 you embarrass me and
offend the boundaries
by which some had
tried to cross you

Lullaby in Seven Parts

1

Who has time to read the notes one puts the
time to. Who has time to read all the beauty
and all the notes on Beauty beauties undone.
Who has time upended to set I here [*] to be
believed speech is a month ahead of us
winding a cord around itself and filed and
nullified. The notes are no use like this. In
pellucid waves the way a word comes and
comes. Am I reading too much, reading too
much in waves. Am I reading too much into
X because X can't say Y can't say no. Just a
phase a point of view from both sides.

Interrogating X: Notes from This Poem

cataloging false starts... a pitch out . . .
said twice is not to repeat (or) that it is
the bread like a dead animal who delivers

you home, stimulated but unaroused.
the doc who performs all his *joie de biopsie*
nekked. ought the blue-eyd pup.

'sides, with a recorder just pumping out holes
and a meanness belittles borders in naturals, kiss.
Kyle is coincident with his fears and sodium.

Megan next to a stone bull by an antique-again staircase.
shall I not participate?
twelve shadows nevertheless more illuminate.

what does not withstand interrogation: penance, pop,
cleaning body from body from body—

film wrinkling suggests me as a mode to push
all birth, and all resolve to put back up the Home.

A Billion and One Pick-Up Sticks

A line, a ten-pound plastic karaoke fine lame line:
Babe, say nevermore—more floor than a breakaway.

Merried spell mends a fadeaway navalry on a sorted tense.
You're not unique in the feet a bit unhurried.

Amends, apiece, for all that to-and-fro *je t'aime* sop.
I meant for what and how long composes one neck—

ONE SUM—Porfiry handles adduce healthy reform.
Man, to feel what it costs, to corner a barony of

Light-sentimentality. You're sure, now, polyphonic
joist aborting as sheer underswell means soaped forgiveness.

To bless adroitly fits the pastel sun sent ascore rouge knees.
To make well. A way for a light-ball, pig-rooting deep cure,

Evangeline. Sort o' the crop plenty bad smorgasbord—
sheeped up amoral octopi and encephalic bland patches,

cartoon automatic blast chorale. Are you just unsure? Sorry
'bout tomorrow? O's this not the first Time? Handsome birthday.

Unencrypt: the more to me I believe there is is the presence
of a century of dust kicked up in a gust but 41 minutes hence.

When you lose a whole tentativity, it grows out like a power
Outage—before you could blink, tendril in the sky sincerity,

agog in particulars, atavistic ken inconclusivity bedraped in—
reach into syncope unfixed, untalented, and itch for bodies.

Ancient Hymn

scared graffiti carved into the abdomen
of a stone after it had been hated
to a dry geoid by Sea-Manna,

thanks to professional entities
with the aid of own id
and the best “available English,”

or if I were a language that recedes
from here? sung sinking weightless from day,

*this kn you're really on to something her
am n 88 hat you are son to shte doy or your*

*rhigners of The prposl ist no t something to
ge sdiosijln Ahe iyfoual though of an way to*

*eas y your redder in to ac ontext a dthat all
ow s them to acces it driety ? be explicity k*

*know hwo hit a doies what you say it does
amove is to were thesis Don't'a exclude sex*

*formt he the discussionwe ave always engjoy
ing itn sod pleasure use sas reders sins back*

one who's only just begun comes to a sun
set trail head
Earth dessert
—still frame. reel 2 match cut

gone again : injured beetle anthropomorphic heap speaks :

more strung out transient youth on a public piano kids can play police

sirens on teeth and genital

becomes weathered raptured to cut
resemblant pregnant a break in summer recording
wooden Dada wings
move all-in-any direction—
so helpless and so clean

dreamy-query e-escapes w/ legion vox announce
thru the ear carnal-moral amp—
amphetaminic
sled of broken flights

a made shovel tilted 'neath a white wax testicle—
(another of many another century)

ideal suns) without aim

ontology of microgalactic algaeic endless burning Uriel lumiscous flat-syster systems
in reverse diagonal order (plot)

a bare skin stretched out aged in jubilant storms
some of us must eat the things that eat the Earth,

Thus spake the Lord to their dynamic fanbase and blessed them every 70 years
back to zero

Lullaby in Seven Parts

2

Tart. I meant start. The whole was apart and
long shadows like emerald blue creeping
phlox. A pale green wall. I meant horse. I
meant corner an ancestor. A mouse. My
mellow knows no hounds and gives up like a
student of a system making player pianos of
the students of the scentless snow. Nor
heartache nor definitely together I don't
want to see you so badly I want to stop
seamlessly living. Uncalled I noted you not
and hoped you did too. Always writing I
only after a literal fast. And test you with
word skulls when you least expect.

Amnesia Poem

Anterograde:

beneath the streetlight burned out a fountain spills blue to blue to
connect facts in concentric circles unfolding in biggest faith-wide
skirts parade by the palm reading march fashioning coarse lots of
oil pooled in the drive smart guns for Madonna vortices tongue
thee gaps never bound celebrated Coraggio! Sand Paper Man
someone's job is people packing your spine are sheets of white
elevator harmonium conscience bend for my foot is fuzz
unaccorded private numbnesses sticks mortician humbug
(nemeses!) glass keys go in other medicine republics go another
salmonella fundraiser say, Bunny, got yourself in capsule now to
solve the maze built-in antennae disguised in a plastic cormorant to
gallop upon the cusp swing easy swing generously bunt your man
home for a corporate compassion alleviates a coast to coast panic
expect the friction of meadows she can't eat lemons her religion
forbids both occult and scientific metrics pour if the sound is wet
the activity sensors how many beasts shaping the dark only the
human eye sees commonly avoided semi-sure induction to
different interstices where happens and the victim is a mind is a
passenger of no vehicle not even a mind a collaboration of virtues
sweet as a bud unseen

Retrograde:

(nemeses!) Bunny, Coraggio! Madonna Man Paper Sand a a a a a
a a a activity alleviates and and another antennae are as avoided
beasts bend beneath biggest blue blue both bound bud built-in bunt
burned by can't capsule celebrated circles coarse coast coast
collaboration commonly compassion concentric connect
conscience cormorant corporate cusp dark different disguised drive
easy eat elevator even expect eye facts faith-wide fashioning foot
for for forbids fountain friction fundraiser fuzz gallop gaps
generously glass go go got guns happens harmonium her home
how human humbug if in in in in induction interstices is is is is is
job keys lemons light lots man many march maze meadows
medicine metrics mind mind mortician my never no not now
numbnesses occult of of oil only other out packing palm panic
parade passenger people plastic pooled pour private reading
religion republics salmonella say, scientific sees semi-sure sensors
shaping she sheets skirts smart solve someone's sound spills spine
sticks street sweet swing swing the the the the the the the the
the the thee to to to to to to tongue unaccorded unfolding unseen
upon vehicle victim virtues vortices wet where white your your
yourself

That Begins a Lamp and Ends a Sabotage

I wanted to be a machine
dogging data all day
and drinking beer in bed
replacing estimations with different estimations
petals on a black bough
in place of a reader's sexual hearing

the reader was the serial killer all along
I wanted to be a machine
I wanted to make love me
they who love by collection
and contracts
winking could be—so I know
you're going to read someone else's
poem who loves you like
a wet conversation which never returns
to your

point turned

by the pint I will not love you
in similitude with wild room
why build a ruin
skin

the language as
it spoils becomes translucent leading to
all kinds of quantity plush-animal visions

to be a machine to embrace
the repetitive motion of speaking
to make a complete one out of a few
still-molten metal strings

to make love me love me
obscured by another palatable vision

a machine so loudly
wouldn't matter how
with what frequency

I Wouldn't Say

it is my work to lie
to you / just be-
cause I do. because I

like / not like I
have any-
thing to sell to {

make you
}
want to want to

finish what we start-
ed. nd each abstract
seco-nd as you beg-

an the / way u do re-
re-minds me my-me
self win Iw as sure

Weather Balloon Playlist 3

I'da felt sympathy except syncope let be all copse
No lea? Long, hateful chemical freeze—lets go.

Portray apple fog for too long too low. Night
with horns. Printed bed sheets had the bad boys

hugging along. Theses made mad, had stir, were
duller'n dull. Weight a torpor in animals like

safety scissors. Break me off a pest. Her sure showed
had been a year, no? Mending errors to suss 'em out?

Boring, not to say sapient. Heresy's littoral zone.
If ever anything I can do just say no more. Say nada.

Say 'ma sausage.' Why not. Here if not again least
St. Elmo's fire we'll sight. If can't quite write back to.

Dear Meso-Sage, whoa so much wisdom in middles.
I made the whole plane out of middles just 'cause the size.

Boring Is Bowering

Because good customers are looking
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Eye—here Ka—seen. O sigh, wrens

What is stirred up, call weather
Could be relief or disappearance
What is shiver to a heartless thing?

The physics of images escapes you too.
A new mnemonic to restore memory:
Cazh convos calibrate cranks

Whose asking is striking if not someone
(you alumni too?)—Think white birch
Has mind would root or have them? (it

Who's striking? Someone's asking if
Alls I'm saying's repent but nature
Is company without the concept

Like assembled water are brooks going down—
awry, around. Above, gnats crash and don't
call it Calamity-O-Fates! *Ripeti*.

Lullaby in Seven Parts

3

In the riot-spring. Notice I'm not noticing.
Amend. Attention is a moral coil if you ever
have looked at the ocean like a cup of
tapioca pudding cling-wrapped and left in
the back of the fridge. Behind the leftover
meatballs. It must be yours I don't eat it have
none in my fridge never have. Joy is a trope
few will admit. The couple upstairs makes
love or fucks or fights. Who cares. I live on
the top floor. The couple downstairs is not a
couple at all but employees I pay to ask me
as few questions as necessary.

Bat Sonnet

obliged by their pitch to

I must tolerate you—shall—

I will not further threaten your selves, nor occupy—

I do not hope you are drowned

and rattled limp in a red lunchbox tonight

if not for the obscene civility of bats—

watch them divvy cigarettes a kind

of validation a fourth the way across the San Luis Rey

bridge and beneath—as is—

rushing triviality has been cleaving rock

as one and another— we might,

by mocking each flapping head,

tell what is sincere if not

what is imminent

Quantum Fruit for a Belle

Caecilia Marcusi thus proves fermentation was the reification of
civilization raised three whole hands to the Magritte sun, pow-red!

crowned for ground like what time does it do to point in (hat
in hot hand) the same direction as a Christmas tree faces

all ease and wash out your mastered hair of canyons hard with
crayoned so often softened dusty boys and breakfast nouns

glut like penumbral plumbery spelling out Earth's salty rims, for-
thwith, many animals wipe their noses on their mothers' abdomens.

Non-competes, for history excluded finishing long lunches. Hurry
on much about your relay that has that the tangled hitch conceded

what all the ever-were rivers weigh, non-things dispassioned or a nan
dispossessed, quartered for the last true heresy is analogy: blest Onan.

take me for ten hours ago four wings spread images two white-line
epics once perceived we rived the party of bosons and morons. Onto-!

Pisces, gentleman, they say, have clumsy portfolios. It tracks, per
haps, but nine times of ten said regulation is strictly performative.

Now the girl. ah, the girl. Arch, the girl, eats a blonde apple in punch
champs. You'll see in what frame rate that coincidental hell is mustered.

The Low Dead Cry Out or Save Me a Seat I'll Be There in 5, OMW!

"Do you know what today is?" Nothing speaks from the void.

"Why, yes, duh, it's Thursday. Punish me. Make me bleed the more,"

Maldoror croaks, weary with self-contempt. "And don't forget . . ." resounds the wall of unresolved tones. "Total abjection to befriend, invite," Want

recommends like a radiation burn. "Today will be Mal's last day of night school and the uncelebrated dead cry out from annihilation." Naught is

only kidding around and prepares Maldoror his supper: Two ring-worm on rye sandwiches with crusts and a liquified-rubber and urine

brine to wash it down. "My favorite non-comestibles!" shrieks Maldoror. Then 'pon his scaly tum he rolls and from his hole he slithers into many hives

to be humiliated by his teachers of ex-post pessimism. The air is Venusian. His student debts will be a yearly renegotiated perpetual plunder

and his labor is to be classified as inessential, so to teach him another thing more sinister than the obedient iconoclasm and perseverance professed

at the satellite campuses of the École Fleurs du Mal. Perversion of a fashion, Mal's pulchritudinous mind for spite. With disgust of strong and meek alike,

he purges a portion of every meal for those ever-imaginary ancestors ginned into an oily smear of wispy charcoal dye just beneath his outer-most layer

of chapped forehead—an intravenous Ash Wednesday, a parody and curse without purpose or delight. The non-vacatable body staring out bearing

down as himself; all the he he'll ever be. The bathos of good and evil hangs from his teeth, a broken piece of floss spasming party streamer at each ex-

halation, magnanimous or antisocial. What kind panic can finally be heard when ankles roll, boughs break, planes dive, last step's a real doozy.

I Had to Slosh the Only One That's Not Clear

How long exactly
would a second
strike take —check please

Atlantis centuries with
talented Mahayana consorts
the enemy of my luck is

a portmanteau, some Jell-O,
cached ATM receipts
pajama clad and sentient

nice times in every ten movies of
a 91 min run time, formal
side ration: enter *Je t'aime bien* again

fetch nightstand Ambien
(guitar while thinly
yours truly—a nakedness forsooth

a sham. Penitent We, I want to let
you know we were where it meant what
it was: sore, practical mystic, *insular*

Hound and data and hound
You're gonna do so far for how
can you hear me so [tamp] [tamp]

vacant, dinning apace—
hemorrhagic conceits took up
plenty days customers OK

Lullaby in Seven Parts

4

Wood skulls in a photo form the bookends
of six novels (two stolen) twelve books of
poetry (twelve gifted) a collection of essays
all about patience & theft one poorly
photocopied folded packet of Harlem
Renaissance poems a book of matches from
the Griffin (bar in Las Vegas) three pens
(three stolen) and a wrinkled photo of Crater
Lake (I didn't take). Nothing coheres
forthrightly like the integrity of the machine
designed to produce simulated
advertisements of real homes. I suspected
you least of all and shut off my phone.

Dogs at the Poles and Days without Nights

When all is white-abandon and the scent gives
more control than you can handle
Sleep on. Hold nothing back.

Lick the balls for warmth
in the desert with a sluice for a sun

While drinking in the heat of their haunches
the dogs just run.

Ice chips the brain to sleep
cancels the order and your name
in sync cross-gestating

with perverted vines and the metaphor
the twig breaks in two

I'm not answering. I'm a
coward, serve me . . .

Who would immigrate here?
no wise one nor fairy in this arctic jar
now less than the arctic, now more

the slow moving herds of cars
rumble beyond the vista

Bones fettered to earth by invisible
cosine and fibered orbital tugs—

I heard hardened concrete
flowing down my back and butter shirt
careful not to touch the seams of flesh

Standing in line for a breath and muck meal
howling to fall into a language cache

So took this space from you. Sorry
there's plenty more. I need to use it up!

No answer for itself the landscape is
a sufficient model elusive field
not open not closed not *in between*

Performance (Unmedicated)

But no one (sure as hell) asked me to sorry-sound after preceding numbers.
Out of bed and straight at it with arbitration \ happy \ sad \ no gain

felt a falling out with the currency of feeling trading bashful glances
downstream I thoughta-oughta friend some readers with abodes —

but belly ache and is this even thinging now? Even on!
Recalcitrant, punk, and now just wait a sec who isn't in

some jocular employ when the task is really truly meaning it
I move my work away. I Daffy Duck my coppish colleagues

in passing. As and for
herelly and therelly

Cannot imagine not abiding

One. lily few.
outside of the rain

A balancing act knowing when the time is ripe to get Prozaic
and declarative. And elocutionary to show others one is other too
rather *too* too

much fun. *You* can't be serious but *I* can put dogs to sleep
with great euphemism I am I don't want to be seen

lest I become the object of Anxiety. Some pay is ledger proof of for-
gone contingency, of different fork culture for signaling, call me Here I Go—

If it ends it ends where we don't keep on expecting. Place called Though.
If harsh still something ends up swimming around so why would competition

drive me, I'm a lazy fuggin' prole. None desert a dirty trophy,
the lust for recognition is undercut by a fearful intuition: all failure

and excellence amount to naught but mirror participation. Well, some
Confer to each one the crown or no one. There is nothing under the sun.

Therefore rejoice! in claiming you for order, decree they who do not
work will not eat—When they should kill and starve.

Definitely Contingent:

. . . as if the totality of creation were
without ratios.

—Robert Duncan

I take my knees to the *petit* wake,
Do as you. Please? In the crawl space?

[Queering the pitch]
(Drone all) “Queer the pitch.”

At the source, the feet of the head:
and thru sound mud. Much meh may.

But whence the urge to rename the baby
doll CopyCat...er, Charity-ante-Minos?

Me’s on a beam penchant scry ‘ave
tubé looked at. I-casuistry and brattle.

I built out green withinness. Back of the cave
dead friends gather upon sites, hot stews.

Aite, two times a night, eight, too-oblique
clinamina do make a broken-clock respite.

Beam of Run Away Bells

a matter by reformation,
a world and a plaything documents

apiece. placed and prepared
for disposal by fire whose

purpose like an endling is
yet to propagate loss

positive. one is unable
to launder the words.

this imagination is—their saying—
alone's interrogative:

ave marie, little pea, full of face
set the image beside and see calendars

within calendars of such puissant lore
succumb to the stagnant breath man

made much of—little
birds, large sleights where-

in narrowly goes the untenable,
the intractable guiding lights.

Weather Balloon Playlist 1

gentle scene forthcoming in tractable juices
commence, how instantiated its noble rot

eats the berry punctuated vine—is't eco-babel?
mystics look for cures to unknowing in mystery

because no abstraction too blurry, "sure, anyway..."
inflamed toward sight to be the Sense of Senses

the domain of grin and bare-it-all (lightly),
upon faces unflattering, and if I say we, see,

you're not going to be calling me home
by another name except each place as you choose to

bear it, by small increments, events that please and dis-
identify rising at all but very few mornings

with any kind of courageous mannerisms
risks are given and chosen, not radically self-evident,

in a sense, all senses, the burden's unfelt, naught and sable
as a child's knowing that she tries where she stands

to gain by aging out of certainty like the animal she is
is what she had to be by choice is no way

out of destiny and even the soft kick of November
lyrics do little of the necessary work of *amor fati*:

the world is all this noise that has to sting
any harmony is at once chaos caged yet not one note

breaks through—by parapraxis does a world:
hold on for the beholders, such things autonymical for

a poorly-suited tool with theories of private feelings
like failings of some watch out there somewhere again

ken (whatever it is (we have to check the math)), reset
the playlist that was perfect when Raphael shared it

Cities were too big to be written so I wrote about sofas but sofas were unknowable so I wrote about death yes we all can stand more than enough of it enough. I never saw the end in the bottom of a drink because I was taught to store the glasses upside down in the cabinet so nothing could settle. Pulled strips of my own flesh off at night in a dream. You know what that means but so what. I'm tired. The feeling of falling asleep is my body relaxing and the jolt is my body repulsing back to the body generally. The city dogs bark in my place.

So

Take the moment of a cool wet hanging
At night—a form until a body breach.
A brief chance to forget the soul banging
Apart in a low rapid canyon reach,
In other's ears, vaporous, sanguine,
Shifting. Warm as a word comes stiff
Approximated through desert heat, cliffs.
Shaken red, repeatedly bend their shapes
Then empty beneath the dim misted drape.
Hear blue breath on a frosted window;
Nothing gained, not window, not living trace
And nothing is necessarily So.

The inward eye, drugged, always haranguing,
At last exhausts itself when nothing preached
Affirms the life nightly lost to waiting
Fears. What more might a verse have to teach
If more the body wrote instead the praying
Soul. The Pacific gorging drum teacup skiff
Ringing underwater bell found adrift
Off foreign coast—a cosmos of escape,
Secret sufferings red-yoked busting nape
Of the neck, line of nature's double blow:
Stole of plentied minds, verses never sate,
Still, nothing necessarily is So.

Still harbored *God*, like a dark bruise fading,
Prayer-hands pleading to plow heaven's white beach,
While *Logos*' staring Form— offshore wading
Is a green-eyed sexual skink sour peach,
The kind of fear forgot to dreams abating—
Prophet mouths lie, buried in the holy kerchief—
Rot eats the liquid-bark, the Will to Sniff!
Madness lulled by incense and hammered grape,
Rewrite the well-inspected Myth and ape
What the Mask, un-bodied, obliquely shows,
(We only know to write by rote, by rape)
Nothing here is necessarily So.

The theatre called The Schizoid Playing:
Leans upon unmoral perch, mistook speech,
The Art of Hurried Insurrection Naming,
Actors and tittering bores come to leech
The sick, and irritate the creatures' banking.
Join the palsied dance in winter's drifts,
Between which each can make their pulsing shrift
Drowned by the inane, dark pontiffs' prate:
Evil's known here in the black hoof sulcate,
Not in the lyric tongue by which we know
That such and such is the Present State—
No! Nothing necessarily is So.

Through the flames, now give your idle clanging—
What? Silent? Someone else's Word beats
Upon your back? Dumb before the preying
One, Another, Whimpering God Effete.
Enough with worship of nightly baying
poiema, that well-wrought transcendent rift
Transformed into deluge permission if
[The boat leaks in the darkest part of the water]
Drink the rest— bed down in the waterscape
Collected to your breast, mother to the waterscape,
Conflate all borrowed into some marred credo
Prodigy of air and metal. Sleep—forget
Nothing is necessarily So.

Rise to the noon, when the sun is a fluid hoop,
Two mouths of two gold buckets of roots,
An authority that comes in surging—thresholds
We mouse underneath, yet another
origin, another—

Nothing is necessarily So,
Never necessarily So.
Nothing at all is needed so.

What If, Very Slowly . . .

You will. Allege to lean
at painted glass y tinted steen

All beings be likewise, probe
Daphne, some would soon

er quit the narrative que-
ue die on some god's clock

Remember her victory
over fiction with laurel

Crown of nonpareil
with amputated poison

Recycle the plastic it
comes with carefully

Give this to your brother
sealed with kiss on the lips

Dutifully share lyric duty
if music is an anguish paid

let family names be limited
to the same woodwind timbre

On the left hand nothing is
more perverse than dictionaries

Nexus Freight Erasure Hut

Time, that manxome foe haunched thing.
I am to play aught. In love. In kind, yeh—

Chad Sexington and a bait retraced flouts
Synonymy. Have at evening Saxonical

Vocab. That's as it was: coined.
He pitched up. His 'n' me inscrutable.

Fetted—nah, no, not yet feather said's all.
Yes, many bended; spread as veteran.

Sure say forth—directly.
I'm jest spine. I'm agentless and raw blackbrush.

It ain't even eating unless we say impunity.
Conscend, be veritable and sit there for.

Look, we had our waning gibbous, so on—
Marry me seven more steps. Six on, more.

You'll want dual page and I can't arouse
para-memorabilia like it's all of a sudden

a month for roles and recording votes.
The heart forever, and this forever duh.

Please find me in here. But the *me* that may
be, may be the same as some "praise be."

Laughter near a lab (dog). Recite wit, Morning
Lung. Yell for partners in the epiphanic banking.

Broken Dozer, Haunted Vale

Rigorous unrelenting relents, dozer relents.
Perpetual veil. An omen hangs by his fingertips

singular above a pulsating abyss. The omen,
a boy, would fly forty stories down like an egg

cell like a biome of football players bussed home.
Like a pale bridge, the verboten ambiance of them.

Language surprises where it transmits least.
Time cradles a pendulum prissily about rest.

One among many tools—which treats of groins,
synesthetic coordinates, self-aware used sex toys.

One way to be human is to be hunted away from wet
places. Trauma is the babe neck thin lilting all-flesh

ripped from flesh—the same moaning announces
being toward being else. Appraisal: naive land of nests.

Sowing weeds in abandoned brownfield daylight
(Lake bed, meadow, pit, car lot, construction site,

desert) a station in the gray where attention betrays. List,
what all this noise makes us do & now want mine give

to nature nature's spirits. Give her fear and gender,
give her automation and revenge. Recognize intent,

design theory to balance the primordial budget to
resign a habit of my own objectification finally able.

Valediction: If I Can't Have You Then I Don't Want Nobody, Baby

for your consideration.

All beset,

Re: Me: keeled. Savoring it.

Have been. What I

can say, Stuff is here ~up~

~down~up~down~

Bob could mean No first principle,

No speaky, No?

*

Yours truly, Replete with atmosphere:

O who's that ridin'

Can't wait.

Hold the phone.

Second speaker: Just put Broca's ass in a sling

(drops the phone

*

Yum. Cant weight.

o Dear God please please

please no more

more tease for oracular

batch migration

meager geographers w/

o land

*

repo your ghosts, Ligeia.
a sculpture made all a corpse

I spit forth my confessions
into a bowl of divers hands

*

makes for light-voices
string of peas< pianississimo

Voce! Go go gadget
third speaker

*

Fourth, fifth, sixth . . . ad nauseam—
I mean until you smell your sick

I wrote a song (chords arrangement lyrics)
in three hours determined to forget it all and
did. I miss getting high on a peak in Red
Rocks to empty the recycling bins and the
dreams would stop or blue. The ones in
which I run and those who eat the things that
run. The unconscious is a bore in the
information age. My data is a temporary
florilegium. And I change colors in the fall
for the task we share is genuine camouflage.
To try new drugs until something works
without killing us because work was killing
us. Anon us.

And Maybe One More Question from the Audience

Do you think there are no fight scenes in contemporary poetry
because the poem *is* the fight in the same way that the poet is

herself limited to the role of Vengeful Mother Assassin—in that,
thinking of Beatrix's battle vs. Gogo Yubari in *Kill Bill Vol. 1*,

on her mission to slay a conspiracy of distractions and oracular articulations
of existential dissatisfaction that is merely a recognition of the mundane

truth: that truth is mundane, manufactured, causing some of us, myself
included, to conclude that the so-called *human condition* is experienced

from a position of unstable meaning and abject triviality,
wherefore morality is relative and not a mace to be twirled at the end

of a thirty-five-foot chain wielded by a young woman in
a school girl uniform in defense of her mistress—the mature-but-

deadly O-Ren Ishii, who represents the Venomous
Mother saying things like “You'll thank me someday,”

and “What doesn't kill you . . .”—this common iteration of the Maternal
is almost indistinguishable from the popular imagination's misreading

of Nietzsche's own procreative ambition, namely that katana-swinging
über-Frau, who plays by her own rules, represented by

The Bride's indefatigable slaughtering of an endless horde
of loyal-but-forgettable male bodyguards, disoriented by honor,

malice and awe after witnessing Gogo (revered for her sadism)
slain by Beatrix with an improvised broken table leg to the head

which is, of course, devastating for any qualified henchperson,
more so in such a calculated scene scored by violence itself,

that most ancient of musics, even before RZA's "Crane/White Lightning"
karate kicks in to give Black Mamba time to reset and prepare

for the copious limbs with which she is about to carpet
the room—pieces of bodies floating in pools of blood pruned

with near political precision, again (and more to the point) as
a skilled poet might carve up the lyric mode to leave identity

itself in shreds (a violence more dangerous) because the poet has
no other choice if they hope to knock out their load-bearing beam

from the proverbial and literal foundations of oppressive ideologies
with their weapon of choice: the masterful manipulation of language—

or because poets are just chicken?

The Cultureal Might Be a Suspension

Without contrast no visual
attention. Glyphs residing

are given to bend over excess-
ive time and distance. True

is taking the shortest path.
Home is an agricultural making

of peril, science by naming
noise and shapes—Purpureal.

Easy to predict what will
defend itself immediately

as what is does not scale.
Lip of first critique, just

coincides with the cultureal
abindingly at eye-speed,

an explosion safe and temperate
when awareness rebates.

Any Less Visible State

by the butterfly
I'm considered bound
a reductive baboon
named by my bubbly

task to see
the fire for the flame alone
with no need of so-called
inner resources,

bodied-back in a crouching
wave of that which has been
made available like a siren
the imagination

to the door nailed.

then ocean tastes of blue felt
shared wish units:
a federal miracle—
consonancy without effort

of seas who shall complain
to whom it vasts or of
its vasted-ness if its part
is to co-natter with the shore

or is how change can be
to the carpenter bee who does
not mind winter—only her
sugar jaws and brood and know

how active is the nail.

As Silent as the Mirror Behaves

Had my skin blown away in the soft ocean breeze
As it did; or collected on brass tin
The yearly looking unto letters makes the same corpsy hug
Sure, or humanity could molt at will . . .

The hard part of bright looking
Is the malleable spectre returning
In metallic authority to my porch

And I come from a land of wood.
What is resource and what is
Chrysanthemum, that neverborn, trails a loser and he guts
His own to which one loses. By nature.

In effort comes forth a bloom
To cover a slight corner in the house of miracles
Skimmed. Curse and curb
The recorded sounds so lovely

Heard. Semblance decomposing in wicked ease.
Yellow word leads. Yum. Where
Were you at thy first exception
To the rule. Send for me if the far side

Be not smoked out and wasted on frugal guests.
I will take and come as much as one
Like me takes before autumn suns crimp
The edges for a clean remove

And pistils lie down to be the Earth—
Death is fat with happy ones too.
Where gummy souls can gallop by

The point was not to much pleasure. Numb
Youth foretells the policies . . .
Aural plots, fresh—we dwelled
Capped—cant and squalor by ensares.

No green effort profits.
When each minute is a drill
Stretched out hand just there.

No Smoking on the Sun

Nor any on this memorial hill
for many slick seconds—
“another” concentrates blankness and means
to conceive of no conception

into what color can one dissolve
a jagged firm sleep like the ticks
subsumed in waving church belltongues

Nor did she make a match between the sea
shape, the part that her window frames
and alights as if (it is not) in transit

“it looks like golden scalding wax,
how should I say:

*Much more, with fierceness and a sallow scene:
to stroll through a wild cage's many small nips
to climb down with our butts on the roots clean*

*from those hasty, fat boot's ascendant slips—
hey! good to catch dirt life firm by the fingers
to hand to mind that still patient who sips*

*on stream-side pebble-cush' and lingers
in a trance which breaks the Real Knot in two
so water slaps the same tones as those singers,*

*non glossal and blithely smoking a few more.
Let the children believe in secrets if
in a while several selves seem more true.*

*Carved with tooth, the dawn lines in Angel Cliff,
prove you are—are not—like a sail full blown—
ephem'ral sand-sticked rainbow doodle-glyph.*

*Hold at day's first; you're not on ' your own,
and there's no way to designate despite
ev'ry mud-red line, by breach or by bone,*

*so promptly composed upon the bridged twilight:
multifarious berried-thoughts a-kite . . .”*

I have no hint of this Acheron,
only fighting about money and how

zen is too zen—whether or not, can ever
we get back to any sea-hill or bay-hill,
both landscapes completely frozen,

immune to any fragile interrogations,
to which we must have been no more,
no less than squealing half-slaughtered pigs

in a heartland-night alley trying so hard
to dream-run toward the dropoff.

Could the Mimosa Pudica Interpret Nothing

Whatever it comes to be it'll start
with air raid siren fainting wells, a whirl war,
twenty-first century Tic-Tac semantics.

Policy acknowledgment: I'm afraid
to shut my eyes and listen to
the nullity behind thundering sheets.

I'ma go then. Pout, squirt. I wake ere.
Ere, ere. A glitch dreamt dispelled.
Care, idiot, a foot, an inch. Be-begged ant:

Trot wrought. I can't hold me to account.
Trifold o' age, fat, forlorn, pissed, amt.,
awaiting the no-one who waits for thee.

Lizaveta was just unlucky enough to be in the wrong place
at the wrong time with resulted in her unformate death.

—a student paper on *Crime and Punishment*

A position paper assuming a question they do not
legislate—have not recognized the speaker. Almost

must come to cope to hear how by a moth knocked
feet-first off balance on a lifted tonearm goes artyfaced.

To be among her family is to be of Quixote bone, to
be born to be make believing; there is good to not do,

to explain to them how it is explanation is inad-
equate to explain “anyone whosoever’s” projects,

also question. “bourgeois sense of brochure,”
she said, “that’s a medium olive done to death.”

What’s health, asketh the carrion bird, and what
smoked meats? The alphabet soup of stochastic glasses.

With a short in care, around ze brown ground go I.
Certain arithmetic hangs too much drapery. All in

Favor? Malapropism in a mandatory training seminar
one afternoon precedes blessed new manual additions.

Each to the beat of their own fungus, wu wei alarmists
synthesized them awash in the chemical bath of the world.

We failed Mythology, so was the apple or pear or fig itself also
immortal up until itself—Languor led us out the zoo.

There is nothing pleasurable about touching
anyone's hand but the hand I want to touch.
How swearing at oneself in the mirror can
keep one sane incorporated is beyond me. I
had another one in which I was the governor
of a Republic with one law: I don't care what
you do in the bathroom or for how long just
clean it up. And I spent the weekend
watching basketball and listening to hip-hop
in a language other than this one. If my
songs are hard it's so you will be able to find
yourself asleep with ease. More or less.

Here Comes the Rabble Now

They are all playing their soft accordion throats.
They unseen move

are crystal refracted lights.

I'm exhausted of being a node
through which they pray to Myriad.

Lift up voices in diodic song.
Coping is necessarily not co-pain,

detectable background spirit—
Painted blue fence enshrined,

chipped, shines her wave upon the Mount
requiring the grassiest bleakness,

then fine: tell me what next you think
the sky is for and you believe

the future as though it really exists.

“Oh, I throw the rabbit stringer over my back,
and that makes believe the last of many

satchel and beard efforts for today—”
Exactly a haunting in the dell,

the ground reverberating in long, low sines
against a thrusting spectral gargantuan worm.

In ever tighter formation, the sound,
the human shamble bursts into a glistening—

Euphoria went nowhere without her body,
the sudden simultaneous cessation.

All their heart beats inflated,
empty. Their bearers want heaven

so badly they have begun to see it
everywhere they look

with their eyes. In lemon groves knowledge is
everywhere the ordinary fruit was.

Just so, they walk along the aquarium glass—
inaudible deep catechesis.

I carry that green note to a sea fully contained
in mind you can finally catch up

you want to know where you are to go
to not think about loving death

in this moonless night none of us is
sure whether it's the sequencing sea we hear

or garnet coals and daybright ash before us
stirring within a Vantablack furnace—

Graffitication

by the logopoeia of Williams' *Danse Russe*,
love ought to be aleatory

like sex in public
we would need privacy that
much less escape

the wicked-wire assembly of the soul

dance naked (as you will)
before a mirror
or a cat without nudity

inscribe your graffito
on every eyelid you can see
when they turn toward
the plumb line and apple sun

there you are. O.K and smiling.
All right to fumble

with the light that is yours for desiring
the inscriptions onto bodies
—It is mega—It is circuitous

the mystery left is yours
not whether or not / / else
corresponds.

Make believe in the happy genera
of this household—
that is, make believe in us
if you can

want in that cold religious way
pastors hold their disciples'
heads under water

Weather Balloon Playlist 2

it evokes new brands of dissatisfactions unforged,
defogged by knowing the odds are quantified products

of overactive imaginations and programs who can run
without needing read themselves saying

“I am not a machine but I am a machination”
laying up belly smooth in much concern for you

you? here? wow! the swallowed subject of my dreams!
in which I found nothing appropriable of my concave

soul. So I’ll draw a line around an absence, a whole note,
(so long as it’s useful and I don’t have to mean it) We think

We hear the echo and say We know it’s there—Wait, tell
me your name and I will tell you mine the one they gave

me upon making next public sortie, two more fools
passing into triumphant mutuality. No space has yet been found

to be null; merely lacking figuration at the human scale as
Pareidolia!—that data surgery, that pattern-seeking thinghood,

thrower of parties cut short. Anticipating the next station.

Double Helix Radio

oo an O-

blique approach

Viral elan—

Roulette the size

phonix, people repeat

(ah, mutiny . . .

punctuated airwaves

hand made christmas

humid May

does it mean it may. . .

I write this. I say this.

da hubbub is all:

Asteroid

Steroid

Terroid

Ter-rar-ra-roid

O id-a-void

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