

**“down-to-earth  
(o very earthy) magic”:  
Nature, Objectivity  
and Folk Speech in  
Lorine Niedecker and  
Theodor W. Adorno**

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**Abstract:** This article reads the poetry of Lorine Niedecker through the lens of Adorno's theory of aesthetics, and vice versa. It argues that Niedecker's poetry can be read (among other things) as a reconstruction of the suppressed "nature" that lies at the heart of Adorno's aesthetics, and that her work belies the anxieties Adorno felt towards the poetic incorporation of dialect and working-class speech. Niedecker also allows us to detect an unconscious urban bias in Adorno's aesthetic theory, which tends to presume an achieved totality of capitalist modernisation, overlooking rural locales like that of Black Hawk Island where Niedecker lived and wrote, in which a non-domesticated nature persists within the wider web of capitalist social relations. In particular, the article likens the "non-expressive" sonic elements of Niedecker's poetry to the non-conceptual manifold which, in *Aesthetic Theory*, is said to constitute "nature."

**Keywords:** aesthetics, Niedecker, Adorno, folk, speech, nature, Objectivists

On Sunday May 11<sup>th</sup> 1941, the day before her 38<sup>th</sup> birthday, the poet Lorine Niedecker enjoyed a memorable day out near her childhood home on Black Hawk Island (Wisconsin).<sup>1</sup> She was accompanied by two friends from the Federal Writers' Project – a New Deal programme for out-of-work writers – and "the local bird woman," Angie Kumlien Main, granddaughter of Thure Kumlien, a nineteenth-century naturalist and ornithologist.<sup>2</sup> Niedecker wrote about it a week later to fellow poet Louis Zukofsky, her one-time lover and life-long correspondent and friend.<sup>3</sup> The letter was important to her; she returned to a copy of it six years later when feeling lost so as to remind herself "[w]here I am and who I am":<sup>4</sup> "The Brontes [*sic*] had their moors," she wrote a few days later, "I have my marshes!"<sup>5</sup> It encapsulates almost every aspect of what makes her such a vitally important and fascinating poet.

The first half of the letter provides a jaunty biographical snapshot of Thure Kumlien, a Swedish aristocrat who "studied a map and in the middle of the ocean decided the best place for birds was Lake

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1 I am grateful to Peter Riley for his comments on an earlier version of this article. All remaining errors are my own.

2 Lorine Niedecker letter to Louis Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 125.

3 Their friendship was often strained. Zukofsky does not emerge favourably from Penberthy's compelling introduction to the Niedecker-Zukofsky correspondence.

4 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, 1947, in Penberthy 1993, p. 144. As late as 1967, she expressed similar sentiments to Gail Roub. See Niedecker letter to Roub, summer 1967, in Roub 1996, p. 86.

5 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, Christmas 1947, in Penberthy 1993, p. 146.

Koshkonong [Wisconsin],” arriving there in 1843.<sup>6</sup> Kumlien became firmly rooted to the local spot (“shut up in the woods”) but enjoyed correspondence with a world-wide network of fellow naturalists, rather as Niedecker – ever remote from metropolitan centres – corresponded regularly with a small coterie of international avant-garde poets.<sup>7</sup> Telling in this account is Niedecker’s honing in on certain “luminous details” of Kumlien’s own letters.<sup>8</sup> She quotes from one to Dr Brewer of the Smithsonian Institute: “It is easier for me to kill and skin a bird than it is to go out and work hard all day for a farmer for fifty cents.”<sup>9</sup> Given Niedecker’s life-long tendency of reworking textual material from letters, historical documents, and overheard speech into her poetry (heeding Zukofsky’s dictum that writers should “spend their time recording and objectifying good writing wherever it is found”),<sup>10</sup> it is worth reflecting on what caught her ear here. The sentence has a subtly curious phonetic structure: from the brute monosyllabic frankness of “kill and skin a bird,” to the final alliterative flurry of “f” sounds. But there is also the economic content of the phrase: Kumlien seems at once consternated and bemused by the strange reality in which it is more profitable to kill wondrous animals than to perform agricultural labour. From the rest of the letter, it seems that Niedecker is just as interested in Kumlien’s perpetual attempts to avoid penury than in his naturalism; the natural world is not exempt, in Niedecker’s mind, from capitalist social relations. What catches her ear is this punctual sharpness of utterance, complex sonic texture, and aural traces of class contradiction.

She was acutely alert to her sonic environment. On this day in 1941 she was, characteristically, as enthusiastic about a rare bird’s song as about Mrs Main’s voice. While at the ruins of Kumlien’s old log cabin, they heard a western meadowlark: it was “like something you hear once in a lifetime and you can’t describe it and you don’t think you could remember it to identify it again, but like the leaves of the trees were singing in every direction, a little flute-like but soft and many tones.”<sup>11</sup> The proximity of descriptive difficulty and the danger of forgetting is not coincidental. As we shall see, from her early 1930s surrealist phase onwards, Niedecker viewed memory as a creative poetic act. Note, too, that she doesn’t in fact visualise the meadowlark; instead, she hovers between a visual objective correlative of the sound (“leaves of the trees were singing in every

6 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 125.

7 Except for stays in New York in the early 1930s, Niedecker remained in Wisconsin the rest of her life.

8 The phrase “luminous details” is from Ezra Pound’s “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris.”

9 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 126.

10 Zukofsky 2000 [1931], p. 201.

11 Ibid., p. 127.

direction”) and an exact sonic description. Of a later outing with Angie Kumlien Main, she wrote: “She always had to see the birds to appreciate ‘em whereas I knew by their sound what they were and knowing what their colours were in my mind, was happy enough.”<sup>12</sup> Suffering from a gradually worsening visual impairment and with a deaf mother (and hence acute awareness of what is *not* being heard), Niedecker was ever a poet ruled by sound – and voice. Mrs Main is described as having “a determined manner of speaking” and Niedecker gives the reader a taste. A strange woman had appeared and observed them. Who was she? Says Mrs Main: “‘Oh, she’s an old rip that’s got the best of Louie. She says We... we...we....’ She repeated this to us and by that time it sounded like *Oui, oui, oui!*” Niedecker’s ear for gossip – especially concerning embittered male-female relations – intersects here with her joy for homophones and homonyms, emphasising at once the materiality of language and the dispersal of sense. (When Kenneth Cox mentioned it, she replied: “is this I? A little like the Molière man finding he’d used prose – homophones and isophones, is that what they are!”).<sup>13</sup> When listening to a “Song Sparrow,” Mrs Main told them that “Ridgeway, a bird man, says the bird says ‘Maids, maids, maids, put your teakettles, teakettles on.’” The hear-say relay (She told > Ridgeway says > the bird says) accentuates the folk-like mantra of the refrain, which itself has minimal semantic reference (a certain flirtatious, pre-modern domesticity is evoked) and increased phonetic prominence via repetition. For Niedecker, then, folk speech, the natural world and the playful materiality of language are primordially fused with her sense of place.

Yet she is no naïve romantic. In the very next paragraph she reminds Zukofsky of the settler-colonial history of her home, and of “Old Chief Black Hawk, who lost his women and children in the swamps where I live so the white army wouldn’t find ‘em.”<sup>14</sup> “After I read about the Black Hawk War,” she states matter-of-factly, “I don’t think much of white people.”<sup>15</sup> In Niedecker the visceral intensity and seasonal hardships of nature experienced by one “born/ in swale and swamp and sworn/ to water” is ever mediated by detailed historical knowledge of inherited violence.<sup>16</sup> Her poems are alert to the continued legacies and renewals of dispossession and the brutal reign of capitalist property relations. Yet most of the locals with whom she shared this place had no idea she was a

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12 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, May 19 1946, in Penberthy 1993, p. 140.

13 Niedecker letter to Kenneth Cox, November 27, 1966, in Dent 1983, p. 36.

14 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 128.

15 Ibid.

16 Niedecker 2002, p. 261.

poet, and she preferred to keep it that way – not to “expose myself.”<sup>17</sup> She had several forms of employment throughout her life: researcher for the WPA Wisconsin guide, proofreader for *Hoard's Dairyman* (an important agricultural journal), rental property manager, and hospital cleaner. As far as most of the locals were concerned, that was all there was to it. On the rare occasion she admitted to a local friend she was a published poet, a note accompanied the volume she gifted: “to ask that it be kept mum – folks might put up a wall if they knew (‘she writes poetry, queer bird, etc. . . .’) and I have to be among ‘em to hear ‘em talk so I can write some more!”<sup>18</sup> Anonymity was a precondition of her poetic production. It is no coincidence that William Carlos Williams called her the Emily Dickinson of her time.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows I want to place Niedecker’s work in dialogue with an unlikely interlocutor, a figure whose comically dour mien and *haut-bourgeois* refinement could not be further from the Midwest poet’s down-to-earth, cut-and-thrust geniality: Theodor W. Adorno. The two have more in common than first meets the eye. For a start, their lives were almost exactly coeval (Niedecker 1903-1970; Adorno 1903-1969). Likewise, both figures were committed, in one way or another, to the Marxist left, and both were involved in the avant-garde cultural movements of their time: Adorno from the *Plätze* of continental Europe and the neon lights of New York and Los Angeles, Niedecker from afar via internationally circulated journals like *transition* (edited by Eugene Jolas) and *Poetry* (edited by Harriet Monroe), and via epistolary exchanges with leading figures of poetic experimentation. Both struggled throughout their lives to think through the consequences of these movements for aesthetic theory and, in Niedecker’s case, for her own poetic production. Both, in different ways, prioritised the art of sound – Adorno the musician and philosopher of modern music, Niedecker the careful sculptor of sonic texture. And both, finally, were deeply concerned with the problem of objectivity. Under the banner of the “primacy of the object” [*Vorrang des Objekts*], Adorno’s post-war work developed a methodology, negative dialectics and aesthetic theory that attempted to chart a course beyond the deathly reifications of capitalist rationalization. Meanwhile, in her commitment to the principles of “Objectivist” poetry, Niedecker struggled constantly to combine the poetics of rigour and clarity with a surrealist-mediated aquatic, flow-like principle of construction. By reading these figures together – each a product of a single, combined and uneven capitalist modernity – I hope to show that Niedecker’s poetry can be read (among other things) as a reconstruction of the suppressed “nature” that lies at

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17 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky May 18, 1941, in Penberthy 1993, p. 129.

18 Cited from Jane Shaw Knox’s *Lorine Niedecker: An Original Biography* in Niemann 2018, p. 159, n. 33.

19 Gail Roub 1996, p. 79.

the heart of Adorno's aesthetics, and that her work belies the anxieties Adorno felt towards the poetic incorporation of dialect and working-class speech. Niedecker also allows us to detect an unconscious urban bias in Adorno's aesthetic theory, which tends to presume an achieved totality of capitalist modernisation, overlooking precisely those rural locales in which a non-domesticated nature persists within the wider web of capitalist social relations.

### **Adorno's Lectures on Aesthetics: Nature, Objectivity, Expression, Construction**

A brief reconstruction of some key terms from Adorno's aesthetic theory will clarify the stakes of the encounter with Niedecker. I shall work here primarily with the 1958/9 lecture transcripts that would become the basis of *Aesthetic Theory*, mainly because they contain certain formulations that are congenial to Niedecker's work and because their pedagogical *dispositio* lends itself to abbreviated summary. Adorno's opening gambit in these lectures is to follow Hegel (contra Kant) in re-grounding beauty in objectivity: "beauty itself is not merely a formal thing, or merely a subjective thing, but rather something in the matter itself [*in der Sache selbst*]." <sup>20</sup> The demands of "the matter" echo across Adorno's late work. <sup>21</sup> Just as aesthetic theorists should jettison all dogmatic criteria of judgement and "immerse" themselves in the works, "devote [themselves] as purely as possible to the matter [*Sache*]," so artists must become "the executor of what the material [*das Material*] demands in every single one of its aspects." <sup>22</sup> Adorno criticizes the exclusion of natural beauty from Hegel's aesthetics on the grounds of its "not itself being pervaded by spirit through and through"; <sup>23</sup> he claims, suggestively, that Hegel considers natural beauty "subaltern," <sup>24</sup> thereby opening up the conceptual space in which both human *and* extra-human nature can be conceived as the "suppressed," "powerless" or "victims" of advanced capitalist societies. His own account will place such suppressed nature at the heart of the dialectic of the aesthetic:

art, which stands in a certain opposition to all nature because it is man-made and already a spiritual manifestation of existence

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<sup>20</sup> Adorno 2018, pp. 3-4. Adorno 2009, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present essay to provide a philological reconstruction of each of the German terms (*die Sache, die Sache selbst, das Material, das Stoff*) translated variously as "matter" or "material."

<sup>22</sup> Adorno 2018, pp. 4, 67. Adorno 2009, pp. 14, 109

<sup>23</sup> Adorno 2018, p. 22. Adorno 2009, p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno 2018, p. 21. Adorno 2009, p. 39.

[*geistige Gestalt des Daseins*], is at once mediated by nature in a certain sense and vindicates suppressed [*verdrängen*] nature, meaning that the theory of artistic beauty, precisely because of this dialectical relationship with nature, is actually inseparable from a theory of natural beauty.<sup>25</sup>

Art is at once opposed to nature and the mouthpiece through which it articulates its suffering.<sup>26</sup> Yet, despite insisting upon the objectivity of beauty and its voicing of the suppressed, he nonetheless follows Kant in retaining the “disinterested experience of natural beauty.”<sup>27</sup> He holds that aesthetic experience proper is possible only when humanity is no longer “locked in a blind struggle with nature,” when its practical and appetitive interests are no longer at stake. The paradox of Adorno’s aesthetics, then, is that “nature” re-enters the realm of beauty *solely* in the mode of subalternity to which it has been reduced by fully capitalised and rationalised societies. At every point, he assumes an achieved finality of instrumental, administered control over nature. As someone who spent her life battling annual seasonal flooding, this raises interesting questions as to the “aesthetic” status of Niedecker’s work.

Adorno first introduces “expression” [*Ausdruck*] in Lecture 5 (December 2, 1958) as both the name for the articulation of suffering and a “mimetic residuum” – that is, a residual element of mimesis which, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is a mode of knowing and dealing with the world premised upon imitation, which preceded and was gradually conquered by instrumental reason.<sup>28</sup> In Lecture 6 he elaborates upon expression’s desire to achieve pure immediacy: “to let suffering itself speak directly, as it were, without placing a third element between expression and artistic manifestation, without inserting a form of stylizing principle, a mitigating or surrounding factor.”<sup>29</sup> In this striving for absolute immediacy, expressionism throws off the shackles of all pre-established forms and conventions, but in doing so it slowly comes to realise that it is impossible to remain at the point of sheer expression: “It cannot unfold in time or in space and *cannot actually objectify itself at all.*”<sup>30</sup> This is the point at which “construction”

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25 Adorno 2018, pp. 26-7. Adorno 2009, p. 47.

26 Cf. Adorno 2018, p. 39 (Adorno 2009, p. 66): “Every dissonance is a small remembrance of the suffering which the control over nature, and ultimately a society of domination as such, inflicts on nature, and only in the form of this suffering, only in the form of yearning – and dissonance is always substantially yearning and suffering – only thus can suppressed nature find its voice at all.”

27 Adorno 2018, p. 31. Adorno 2009, p. 54.

28 Adorno 2018, pp. 48-9. Adorno 2009, pp. 80-81. See also Adorno and Horkheimer 2002.

29 Adorno 2018, p. 59. Adorno 2009, p. 97.

30 Adorno 2018, p. 60. Emphasis added. Adorno 2009, p. 99.

is demanded. Construction is the artistic elaboration of “the logic of the material”:

the effort to extract, purely from the matter [*aus der Sache*] and purely from the postulates of the matter – but through all efforts of the organizing artistic awareness – that objectivity which was once guaranteed by the established forms dictated to artists, whether truly or only supposedly, without borrowing from anywhere else.<sup>31</sup>

Adorno is at pains to stress that construction should not be confused with form. Construction is an organic, immanent elaboration of the logic of the material itself, whereas form is an externally imposed (implicitly reified) shaping power. The task of the artist is not *creation*, which Adorno equates with bourgeois ideology, but rather “to submit without arrogance or vanity, and with the utmost concentration, to what the matter wants purely of its own accord [*was die Sache rein von sich aus will*].”<sup>32</sup> This is the precondition for artistic objectivity as Adorno understands it: that is, for an art truly adequate to the historico-philosophical conditions of the postwar world.

Yet construction comes with its own limitations. Its desubjectivizing bent risks reproducing an enlightenment antipathy to expression as such. On the one hand, Adorno associates this anti-expressivist tendency with the German postwar youth in particular, who seem committed to a “de-lingualization” [*sich zu entsprachlichen*] of art and an elimination of all “speech-like” elements of artistic production (one senses here the work of shame at any too-easy utterance in the aftermath of the Holocaust).<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, antipathy to expression is an integral part of instrumental reason. As a result, claims Adorno, “[the] greatest works of art today will probably always be those in which the construction principle is very radically taken to its conclusion yet which, often through the very hardness of the construction principle, no longer submit to this ban on the expressive sphere.”<sup>34</sup> But how would this argument look for an aesthetic mode effectively *constituted* by expression? A year earlier, Adorno had published what became one of his most famous essays, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” tackling this problem head on. Language here is the meeting place of lyric’s subjective impulses (expression) and conceptual and social universality (objectivity). “The highest lyric works,” writes Adorno, “are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter [*von bloßem Stoff*], sounds forth in language until language itself

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31 Adorno 2018, p. 63. Adorno 2009, p. 103.

32 Adorno 2018, p. 68. Adorno 2009, p. 110.

33 Adorno 2018, p. 68. Adorno 2009, p. 111.

34 Adorno 2018, p. 70. Adorno 2009, p. 115.



acquires a voice.”<sup>35</sup> In such works expression “reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language.”<sup>36</sup> Ever wary of Heideggerianisms, however, he quickly adds that “language should not be absolutized as the voice of Being”: the fusion should instead be viewed as a “reconciliation” whereby “language itself speaks only when it speaks not as something alien to the subject but as the subject’s own voice.”<sup>37</sup> From this utopian perspective, the subject achieves objectification by unlocking the hidden vitality of an otherwise reified language.

In case this reconciliation seems rather too eirenic,<sup>38</sup> Adorno emphasises that “the lyric work is always also the subjective expression of a social antagonism.”<sup>39</sup> Poetic subjectivity is enjoyed only by a privileged minority of “autonomous subjects capable of freely expressing themselves”; the majority of people have been degraded to objects – of the poetic subject and of history itself – “grop[ing] for the sounds in which sufferings and dreams are welded [...] in forms however impure, mutilated, fragmentary, and intermittent.”<sup>40</sup> Historically, the folksong has been one such form, and it is this which constitutes part of the “collective undercurrent” which is said to provide the foundation for all seemingly individual lyric poetry.<sup>41</sup> Adorno identifies García Lorca and Brecht as two modernist heirs of this Romantic tradition of fusing lyric with folk collectivity, noting that Brecht in particular was “granted linguistic integrity without having to pay the price of esotericism.”<sup>42</sup> But he also sounds a note of caution. This type of poetry is said to raise the question of “whether the poetic principle of individuation was in fact sublated to a higher level, or whether its basis lies in regression, a weakening of the ego.”<sup>43</sup> The ambiguity lies in such poetry’s close relation to *dialect*, which Adorno associates with a pre-individuated, pre-bourgeois state of affairs. Indeed, in his earlier *Minima Moralia*, he was even more vociferous:

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35 Adorno 1991, p. 43. Adorno 2003b, p. 56.

36 Adorno 1991, p. 43. Adorno 2003b, p. 56.

37 Adorno 1991, pp. 43, 44. Adorno 2003b, p. 56, 57.

38 See Denise Riley’s rather more fraught account of lyric authorship, which quotes and comments on this passage from Adorno, in Riley 2000, pp. 56-92.

39 Adorno 1991, p. 45. Translation modified to include “also.” Adorno 2003b, p. 58.

40 Adorno 1991, p. 45. Adorno 2003b, p. 58.

41 Ibid. The other part is “historical experience”: “Often, in contrast, poets who abjure any borrowing from the collective language participate in that collective undercurrent by virtue of their historical experience.” Adorno 2003b, p. 59.

42 Adorno 1991, p. 46. Adorno 2003b, p. 58.

43 Ibid.

To play off workers' dialects against the written language is reactionary. [...] Proletarian language is dictated by hunger. The poor chew words to fill their bellies. [...] If the written language codifies the estrangement of classes, redress cannot lie in regression to the spoken, but only in the consistent exercise of strictest linguistic objectivity. Only a speaking that transcends writing by absorbing it, can deliver human speech from the lie that it is already human.<sup>44</sup>

The proletariat thus find themselves in a curious position in Adorno's writing. They constitute part of that subaltern nature suppressed and reduced to historical objects by capitalist rationalization and, as such, on the logic of his aesthetic theory, poetry must give voice to them; yet it seems it must do so in any voice other than their own. Of course, no transcription or elaboration of the vernacular in written work is ever truly "authentic" (always mediated by scriptural conventions), and such practices, when carried out by bourgeois writers, are fraught with issues of alienation and appropriation.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, the status of working-class speech in Adorno's work is arguably *symptomatically* ambiguous. Niedecker's poetry will allow us to probe this and other pressure points further.

### Niedecker's "Folktales of the Mind"

It has become a critical commonplace to observe that Niedecker spent her life torn between post-Imagist objectification, with its ideals of condensation, compression and totality at rest, and Surrealism, with its interest in subjectivity and the unconscious.<sup>46</sup> An important early letter to Mary Hoard expresses her frustration: "Objects, objects. Why are people, artists above all, so terrifically afraid of *themselves*? Thank god for the Surrealist tendency running side by side with Objectivism and toward the monologue tongue. It is my conviction that no one yet, has talked to himself. And until then, what is art?"<sup>47</sup> Objectivist poetics is premised upon sincerity ("the detail, not mirage of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist") and objectification ("the resolving of

44 Adorno 2005, p. 102. Adorno 1987, pp. 129-130.

45 For a probing account of issues of dialect and dialectic in Marx's *Capital* vol. 1, see Morris 2016. For an account of how these issues play out in the history of the novel, see Williams 1983, pp. 67-118.

46 Albeit a hard-won commonplace very much the result of Jenny Penberthy's heroic editorial labours, which have enabled a fuller view of Niedecker's oeuvre, especially her early surrealist work. In my view the most compelling accounts of Niedecker's dual allegiances to Objectivist poetics and Surrealism are Nicholls 1996, Blau DuPlessis 2008, and Bazin 2012.

47 Niedecker letter to Mary Hoard, mid-1930s, in Penberthy 1996, p. 87.

words and their ideation into structure”).<sup>48</sup> It is clearly part of the general modernist movement towards construction and desubjectivisation that Adorno identified in his lectures. Niedecker is here exasperated with what she perceives as its repression of the self, which generates a fear of subjectivity akin to that which Adorno had identified in the anti-expressionism of post-war art. Surrealism, not least automatic writing, offered a monologic counter-movement that enabled Niedecker to tap in to the suppressed field of expression (in Adorno’s expansive sense) whilst further elaborating a key element of objectivist poetics to which she was committed: its ability to capture *process*, “[t]he thing as it happens. The how of it happening becomes the poem’s form.”<sup>49</sup> She was influenced by Eugene Jolas’s magazine *transition*, which emphasised several elements that would inform her poetry: a sense of flow from the notion of “transition” itself (between states of consciousness, or historical periods), “verticalism” which added an ascending or descending *direction* of flow (and created the possibility for a simultaneity of conscious and unconscious states), an anti-realist celebration of the “madness of illogic,” and a “revolution of the word” – a renewal of language capable of figuring forth the vital, illogical associations of the mind, which itself, it was hoped, would re-vitalise the world.<sup>50</sup>

What, in light of this, did it mean for Niedecker to talk to herself in the “monologue tongue”? We must take her at her word when she writes to Gail Roub: “Early in life I looked back of our buildings to the lake and said ‘I am what I am because of all this – I am what is around me – those woods have made me....’”<sup>51</sup> Any adequate *self*-articulation will thus involve a mimetic speaking of place which is attuned to the minimal dissonance between “*because of all this*,” (implying that I am *separate* to that which I behold) and “I am what is around me” (suggesting an imaginary unification of viewer and viewed).

I must have been washed in listenably across the landscape  
to merge with bitterns unheard but pumping, and saw  
and hammer a hill away; sounds, then whatsound, then  
by church bell or locomotive volubility, what, so unto  
the one constriction: what am I and why not. That  
was my start in life, and to this day I touch things  
with a fear they’ll break.<sup>52</sup>

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48 Zukofsky 2000, p. 194.

49 Niedecker on Zukofsky’s poetry, quoted in Bazin 2012, p. 983.

50 See Hatch 2016.

51 Niedecker letter to Roub, summer 1967, quoted in Roub 1996, p. 86.

52 Niedecker 2002, pp. 31-2.

These lines, from part VII of the 1934 version of “Progression,” tell a dislocated origin story. They begin with a supposition (“I must have been”), not definite knowledge. “Washed in” has two main permutations: to be “washed in” from somewhere else (by the river), or to have been spread like a thin, light base layer of paint across the scene. The neologism “listenably” then implies either the sound of the “I” being “washed in” (from elsewhere) or, paradoxically, that the projective painterly dispersal of self achieves visual integration via sound. The sonic and visual constantly usurp one another in these lines, enabled by the purposely ambiguous agreement of subject and verb. Bitterns are a type of heron known for going *unseen* in the vegetation at the edges of lakes or ponds, and for their comically, archetypically Niedeckerian “loud, bellowing” call resembling “an old hand-operated water pump.”<sup>53</sup> The line “to merge with bitterns unheard but pumping” thus means either that the bitterns are calling (“pumping”) without producing sound (“unheard”) – drawing attention to the silent sounds of reading – or that the poet herself, on the rural periphery, is invisible in the reeds, writing poetry she fears no one will read (“unheard but pumping”). The line defamiliarizes the bittern’s audibility by subtracting its sound and by emphasizing its mimetic association with the pump whilst metaphorizing the poet’s bathetic self-image.

There is no clear locus of enunciation here. The potential dispersal of the “I” renders moot deictic markers like “a hill away.” Likewise, grammatical forms cannot be relied upon as anchors of ordered meaning. “Saw” at the end of line 2 is initially read as a verb whose subject is the “I” from line 1, but is retroactively transformed into a noun by enjambement (“saw/ and hammer a hill away”). This practice of retroactive transmutation, sudden shifts in the flow and direction of sense, is one Niedecker increasingly refined, reaching its apotheosis in “Paean to Place.” Prepositions, which indicate logical relations between elements, become semantically overdetermined. Does the “by” in line 4 signal spatial proximity or causality? If the latter, then “church bell or locomotive volubility” becomes an agent of transformation in a mini narrative: “sounds, then whatsound, then/ ... what, so unto” where the last two prepositions visibly represent broken “sound” (so-un).<sup>54</sup> An internally undecideable sound (pre-modern church bell or modern locomotive volubility?) transforms unrecognized “sounds” into a recognizable “what”: “the one constriction: what am I and why not.” Constriction is at the heart of Niedecker’s poetics, signalling the

53 Stallcup 2007, p. 9. Archetypically Niedeckerian because of her obsession with sound and her well-known odes to the (modern) water pump that was belatedly installed in her home in the 1960s.

54 In one of her earliest poems, “Mourning Doves,” Niedecker played similarly with the written, visual form of “sound”: “The sound of a mourning dove/ slows the dawn/ there is a dee round silence/ in the sound.” Niedecker 2002, p. 23.

pressurized narrowing of subliminal flows (as figured, for example, in her odes to her newly installed water pump).<sup>55</sup> But this particular constriction is the compressed “I” of the poet’s identity, congealed from the soundscape. The monosyllabic beats imbue “what am I and why not” with the quality of a punchline, a point of sound implying a firm conclusion, but this sonic certainty is belied by the residual interrogative of “what am I,” as if hovering between proposition and self-doubt. The latter is then itself at odds with “and why not,” which connotes defiance (“yes, I do belong to this rural place, and what of it?”) and a certain arbitrariness (“Yes, this dislocated origin story will do just as well as any other”). The “I” of line 1 is thus retrospectively revealed as the ambiguous outcome of a process of sonic encounters, one whose identity inheres less in propositional certitude than momentary rhythmic punctuation.

Only now, perhaps, can we make sense of the rest of Niedecker’s letter to Mary Hoard:

It is my belief objects are needed only to supplement our nervous systems. I have said to Z. [Zukofsky] (and says he: is it logic? which he *would* say) that the most important part of memory is its non-expressive, unconscious part. We remember most and longest that which at first perception was unrecognizable, though we are not aware of this. We remember, in other words, a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm [...] Along with this if anybody can possibly see the connection, I conceive poetry as the folktales of the mind and us creating our own remembering.<sup>56</sup>

The unrecognizable is, by definition, that which escapes what Adorno would call identitarian thinking. The “non-expressive, unconscious parts” of memory are those elements at the edge of, or beyond, linguistic signification (Zukofsky’s “logic”): “a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm.” Such “non-expressive” elements are, for Adorno, precisely the stuff of expression in the sense of a “mimetic residuum” of the “nature” that has been suppressed. Indeed, what Niedecker seeks to remember is not only what Ruth Jennison has aptly called “the material contingencies of subject formation,”<sup>57</sup> but arguably also *nature as such*. This is no nostalgic pastoral precisely because poetry is said to *create* “our own remembering”; in other words, *the memory does not precede the poem*, but is retroactively posited after the fact, just as the subject of memory is created in the poetic act of re-membering. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno

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55 See “*To my small/ electric pump*”: “To sense/ and sound/ this world/ look to/ your sniffer/ valve/ take oil/ and hum.” See also “*To my pres-/sure pump*.” Niedecker 2002, pp. 197, 201. On constriction as key to Niedecker’s poetics, see Peterson 1996.

56 Niedecker letter to Mary Hoard, mid-1930s, in Penberthy 1996, p. 88.

57 Jennison 2012, p. 144.

reformulates the temporality of suppressed “nature” from a lost past to a not-yet-existent future:

Nature, to whose imago art is devoted, does not yet in any way exist [*Die Natur, deren imago Kunst nachhängt, ist noch gar nicht*] [...] What does not exist becomes incumbent on art in that other for which identity-positing reason, which reduced it to material, uses the word nature. This other is not concept and unity, but rather a multiplicity [*ein Vieles*]. Thus truth content presents itself in art as a multiplicity, not as the concept that abstractly subordinates artworks. The bond of the truth content of art to its works and the multiplicity of what surpasses identification accord.<sup>58</sup>

Poetry remembers that which does not yet exist: nature. Nature here denotes the other of “identity-positing reason”; as such, it is a *non-conceptual manifold*. And what better way to describe “a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm” than this? Niedecker imitates, configures and compresses these para-logical elements into futural anamneses.

### Composing “Listenably”; or, the Vocalic Remainder

The voice is a prime locus of such “non-expressive” elements. As Mladen Dolar has observed, following the founding gesture of phonology – the total reduction of the voice as lived substance to logical oppositions – there remained “a non-signifying remainder, something resistant to the signifying operations, a leftover heterogeneous in relation to the structural logic which includes it.”<sup>59</sup> Niedecker’s is an art of the remainder, and hence of the voice. Her early interest in the “sub-conscious” (her term) segues into a prolonged experimentation with “subliminal” sound-structures, syntactical dislocation, and linguistic materiality.<sup>60</sup> Often, this is not a matter of her own voice (her own voice-matter), but of the “folk” voices she hears around her.<sup>61</sup> Lisa Robertson is quite right that in Niedecker listening is a compositional act, and that “[t]he listener devises tactics of receiving in order to turn sound toward shapeliness.”<sup>62</sup>

.....  
58 Adorno 2004, p. 173. Adorno 2003a, pp. 198-9. It was Flodin’s excellent article (2022) that drew my attention to this passage. I’m grateful to Antonia Hofstätter for alerting me to it, and to the edited volume *Adorno’s Rhinoceros* in which it is published.

59 Mladen Dolar 1996, p. 10.

60 Cf. Nicholls 1996, pp. 195-6.

61 I follow Niedecker in using the term “folk.” See, e.g., her letter to Jonathan Williams in 1970: “I probably show a folk base and even LZ [Louis Zukofsky] knew it many years ago,” cited in Penberthy 1993, p. 4.

62 Robertson 2008, p. 86.

In “Progression” Niedecker refers to her art as a “phonographic deep song,”<sup>63</sup> a phrase whose technological register recalls Freud’s advice on listening for analysts: “he must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone.”<sup>64</sup> This is Niedecker among the “folk from whom all poetry flows/ and dreadfully much else” (note the ambivalence),<sup>65</sup> ever on the listen-out for “some puzzlement, some sharpness, a bit of word-play.”<sup>66</sup> Her listening is perhaps more active than Freud’s, less a passive reception and more a mildly impatient expectancy of benign interpellation, awaiting some turn-of-phrase or wording to make her ears pop or the static charge – an aural *punctum*. The ear was formed from childhood: she had a grandfather “who somehow somewhere had got hold of nursery and folk rhymes to entrance me” and a mother “speaking whole chunks of down-to-earth (o very earthy) magic, descendant for sure of Mother Goose.”<sup>67</sup> A genealogy of entrancing sound, a down-to-earth magic: Niedecker’s infra-Enlightenment archive.

It was phrases like this that pricked her ears:

A lawnmower's one of the babies I'd have  
if they'd give me a job and I didn't get bombed  
in the high grass

by the private woods. Getting so  
when I look off my space I see waste  
I'd like to mow.<sup>68</sup>

The surreal juxtaposition of lawnmower and babies locates us in the image-realm of the cyborg until we realise, with the second line, that this is a working-class voice with colloquial peculiarities. “Babies,” “bombed” and “Getting so/ when I look off my space” bring us close to the “dialect” of which Adorno was so wary. The latter enjambment in particular serves to emphasise the folksy lilt of the utterance, a

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63 Niedecker 2002, p. 29. Robertson’s excellent article elaborates upon this phrase.

64 Freud, cited in Bollas 2009, p. 10. Freud’s student, Theodor Reik, put it differently: “Psychoanalysis is in this sense not so much a heart-to-heart talk as a drive-to-drive talk, an inaudible but highly expressive dialogue.” Reik 1948, p. 144.

65 Niedecker 2002, p. 142. Peter Middleton writes of the ambivalence of these lines: “she oscillated between immersion and alienation from the local community, and the term ‘folk’ itself is a measure of this instability.” Middleton 1999, p. 175.

66 Niedecker letter to Corman, December 15 1966,

67 Niedecker letter to Kenneth Cox, December 10 1966, cited in Penberthy 1993.

68 Niedecker 2002, p. 96.



syntactical circumlocution that is strangely pleasant and familiar on the ears.<sup>69</sup> Yet the warm imitation of vernacular speech is at odds with the almost nihilistic content. Like many of the poems published in *New Goose* (1946), this one is haunted by the Depression and World War II alike. The man (for we infer it is a man) is unemployed and gets high (“bombed”) on, we assume, weed (because of the metonymic association of “high grass”). In his narcotic stupor he begins to fantasize about mowing “waste,” an act of destruction both against nature and, we infer, against himself – the “waste” of the capitalist economy. His nihilistic *jouissance* seems exacerbated by the proximity of private property, as if the latter’s very presence mocks him and the comparative littleness of “[his] space” (which, tellingly, rhymes with “waste”). In this context, the lawnmower assumes the nihilatory potential of the bomb, just as class *ressentiment* threatens to explode. Yet the *form* of the poem attempts to sculpt the sonic traces of capital’s “waste” into linguistic vitality, whilst its intense psychological subtlety belies any accusation that dialect equates to pre-individualistic regression.

Given Adorno’s attitude to fridge doors, one can only imagine what he made of lawnmowers.<sup>70</sup> Niedecker’s relationship to them was ambiguous. She spends countless letters informing Zukofsky of her constant mowing; the grass on Black Hawk Island seems particularly resistant to domestication: “Last week I reclaimed another several feet of lawn from the wilderness. Already more than I care to mow by hand but next year Henry [her father] will have a power mower we hope.”<sup>71</sup> It seems the power mower never materialised because two years later she has “mowed by hand to the river.”<sup>72</sup> In doing so she discovers “two red dogwood and the sweetest little ash sapling”; she leaves them 24 hours before heading back to fence them off “to keep ‘em from harm” only to discover

my neighbour who has a power mowing machine came over and in his zeal mowed me down my dogwoods and tree. Conservationists here! Also he destroys all the teal duck nests with his infernal machine.<sup>73</sup>

In the earlier letter the power mower represented liberation from back-breaking labour, but now embodies the destruction of nature and

69 See also: “Must be going to give em/ to the church, I guess” in “Mr. Van Ess bought 14 wash-cloths?”. Niedecker 2002, p. 95.

70 See Adorno 2005, p. 40. Adorno 1987, pp. 42-3.

71 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, April 28 1946, in Penberthy 1993, p. 138.

72 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, June 6 1948, in Penberthy 1993, p. 148.

73 Ibid.



Niedecker's relation of care. Unlike Adorno, Niedecker's approach to labour-reducing technologies is one of circumspect pragmatism: the gratitude of the manual labourer for less work coupled with an alertness to its destructive potential. Both aspects are embedded in Niedecker's joyful relationship with the very extra-human nature that threatens constantly to overwhelm her: "Lots of wild mint where I wanted to mow (with corn knife) but I wouldn't, such sweet little things."<sup>74</sup> This is a poet who knew in ways Adorno could never imagine the suppressed "nature" of which he spoke.

Above all, she knew the floods. In his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno, discussing the tenuous provisionality of aesthetic sublimation, says: "the element of immediate desire [...] can flood it again at any moment" before reiterating Horace's dictum from the *Epistles*: "nature always returns, even if one drives it out with a pitch fork."<sup>75</sup> Less than two months after Adorno's final lecture in 1959, Niedecker was flooded again: "I was evacuated! Well, almost. Aen took me out in his speed boat after we elevated my furniture as best we could. Water up to top of hip boots as I walked out of my yard."<sup>76</sup> Adorno's learned dictum is Niedecker's life and death. It is this lifelong pattern of flooding, in which humans, their belongings and technology are annually humbled, that explains Niedecker's deep-seated attachment not only to a "poetics of flow," but also to that thick materiality of sound which occasionally threatens to overwhelm sense:

thru birdstart  
wingdrip  
weed-drift

of the soft  
and serious—  
Water<sup>77</sup>

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno speaks of the "more" of nature, its intrinsic excess.<sup>78</sup> Art is said to imitate nature, not in the sense of nature as *object* but by mimetically reproducing this excess itself. In Niedecker it takes the form of the excess of the linguistic and vocalic remainder, the para-logical or subliminal sound waves. Yet, despite the fact that the most rigorous

74 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, June 19 1948, in Penberthy 1993, p. 149.

75 Adorno 2018, p. 35. Adorno 2009, p. 59-60.

76 Niedecker letter to Zukofsky, April 5 1959, in Penberthy 1993, p. 249.

77 Niedecker 2002, p. 238.

78 See, e.g., Adorno 1997, p. 104. Adorno 2003a, p. 122.

interpreters of Adorno's aesthetics allow for an element of the *uncanny* in such mimesis,<sup>79</sup> it remains the case that Adorno does not have in mind here the *literal* excess of nature: from seasonal flooding to (in our time) capitalogenic climate catastrophe. One suspects Niedecker's mimesis is more akin to a *détournement* of the sublime fused with Adorno's conception of pre-Enlightenment magic:<sup>80</sup> no Kantian, masculine heroics here in the face of nature's overwhelming power, but an earthy, wily acceptance of nature's force tinged with pragmatic resistance and linguistic homage. The scopic dominance of the gaze ("Objective: (Optics) – The lens bringing the rays from an object to focus")<sup>81</sup> gives way to the receptive agency of the ear, an organ as porous as the threshold between nature and domestic interiority in times of flood. Hers is truly a "sublime/ slime-/song."<sup>82</sup>

And yet it's a "song" composed with the most advanced poetic forces of production available. Combined and uneven capitalist development has produced a situation in which nature in Black Hawk Island has been surveyed and parcelled out as private property,<sup>83</sup> but has categorically *not* been fully domesticated. It achieves initial, uneasy articulation in Niedecker's *transition*-influenced surrealist flows and illogics, but her work is also pitched quite consciously against the repressed objectivities of imagist and objectivist poetics. They are objectivities, we now see, whose unconscious is *urban*. It is no coincidence that the archetypal imagist poem occurs in the Parisian Metro, nor that Adorno's aesthetics assumes the total victory of capitalist rationalization. Niedecker's stubborn insistence upon flows and subliminals is thus proof of a faithful devotion to the demands of the "material" invoked by Adornian aesthetics; in heeding this demand, she was ensuring the adequacy of her art to the historico-philosophical situation of rural Wisconsin (a phrase whose potential bathos is precisely symptomatic of the situation itself). Her immanence to place and the local working-class community allowed her finely-tuned ear to compose "listenably" the vocalic traces of the political unconscious without ceding an inch to folksy regression or uncritical populism. The result is a paradoxical fusion in Niedecker's work of a *seemingly* pre-modern, pre-individual, *mimetic* relation to the world but one which *can only be articulated through the very latest modern poetic developments*. Extending

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79 See Flodin 2022.

80 "[Mimesis] played an equally central part in the lives of primitive humans, ultimately leading to the practice of magic, whose underlying idea is essentially that one can gain control of nature by imitating some natural phenomenon or other." Adorno 2018, p. 41. Adorno 2009, p. 68.

81 Zukofsky 2000, p. 12.

82 Niedecker 2002, p. 265.

83 Many of Niedecker's poems are overt reflections on private property and foreclosure.

Marx's argument that "the formation [*Bildung*] of the five senses is the work of all previous world history,"<sup>84</sup> Adorno suggests that Impressionism allowed us for the first time to see the beauty of the sea, "to objectify artistically the gradations found in the sea."<sup>85</sup> Likewise, Niedecker sought to objectify a contemporary natural world that was simultaneously "before" full modernisation, "alongside" literary modernity, and in advance of a post-capitalist "nature" whose dispersed manifold she re-members. In her writing, full individuality – the "monologue tongue" – becomes newly articulable as a retrospective projection of material encounters. It is no longer alienated in any simple sense from nature and the social totality, but rather seeks to

...tilt  
upon the pressure  
execute and adjust<sup>86</sup>

working *with* natural forces whose objective powers it has learned to respect, and whose material resistances it channels into mimetic self-making.

.....  
<sup>84</sup> Marx 1973, p. 353. Translation modified.

<sup>85</sup> Adorno 2018, p. 28. Adorno 2009, p. 49.

<sup>86</sup> Niedecker 2002, p. 265.

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