"WILD GREEN ARTS AND LETTERS": NIEDECKER'S NORTH CENTRAL POEMS AS ECOTONES OF TEXT AND ENVIRONMENT

by

BROOK LOUISE HOUGLUM

B.A., Willamette University, 1998

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of English)

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

September 2003

© Brook Louise Houglum, 2003
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of **English**

The University of British Columbia

Vancouver, Canada

Date **Oct. 1, 2003**

---

http://www.library.ubc.ca/spcoll/thesauth.html
Abstract:

Niedecker's work in *North Central* (1968) examines and constructs relationships between ecology and textuality. In this volume, Niedecker's attention to the specific landscapes of Lake Superior, Midwest and Wisconsin locales in "Traces," and "Wintergreen Ridge" of the Ridges Sanctuary employs an ecological epistemology: one that investigates the biodiversity, evolutionary history, present conditions, and processes of organisms in each particular habitat. Niedecker's profound familiarity and interest in these landscapes creates a text that demonstrates, in the words of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, an ecological portrayal of "interdependent communities, integrated systems, and strong connections between constituent parts" (xx). Environmental writer and critic John Elder suggests that one way to conceive of a conversation with a natural space is to enter an "ecotone between literature and the natural world" (*Ecopoetry* x). "Ecotone" signifies the meeting and overlap of two habitats, such as a shoreline of beach and water, where species of each separate habitat interact and create unique spaces of biodiversity and exchange. This paper examines Niedecker's poetics and argues that the poems in *North Central* are ecotones where specific landscapes meet and influence the texts in which they occur.

Each chapter focuses on one section of *North Central* (with the exception of the poem "My Life by Water") and examines Niedecker's poetics and method of composition through the lens of the particular ecotone of the poem. Chapter one considers Niedecker's manuscript "Notes to Lake Superior" and delineates some aspects of her poetics, such as the use of recurring words to establish connections and shift meanings,
the instability of the text, and incorporation of discourses of history and geology it engages. The chapter suggests that the Lake Superior bioregion and its geological and historical layers constitute the form of the "Lake Superior" poem. Chapter two focuses on the "Traces of Living Things" section of *North Central* and argues that the "reflective" poetics Niedecker developed in the 1960's are aligned with Taoist and Zen traditions and haiku form. The poems of "Traces" brush-stroke landscapes, demonstrating relations between organisms, humans, sounds, and sights of the Wisconsin and Black Hawk Island environment. Chapter three looks at "Wintergreen Ridge" as an ecotone where the preserved landscape of the Ridges Sanctuary provides an opportunity for Niedecker to advocate for conservation and demonstrate conservationist composition by acknowledging biodiversity through multiple discourses of language, and delineating specific processes performed by plants, bugs, and humans.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ............................................ ii  
Table of Contents ................................. iv  
Acknowledgements ............................... v  

CHAPTER I  
Ecotone and Agate: Niedecker's Poetics in "Lake Superior" ................. 1  

CHAPTER II  
Moments of Perception: Niedecker's Reflective Poetics ...................... 28  

CHAPTER III  
"The Ridge of Her Investigation": Niedecker's Conservationist Poetics ...... 48  

Works Cited ........................................... 73
Acknowledgements:

Dr. John Cooper, for entertaining my many queries, for answering with precision and humor
Dr. Jenny Penberthy, for her generosity, expertise, and lovely cups of tea
Dr. Laurie Ricou, for his attention to the construction of my sentences, for conversation about what "ecopoetics" means
Sean Conway, for proofreading, for unceasing encouragement, for a celebratory picnic
Forest Gander, for first suggesting that I read Niedecker's *Granite Pail*
Ecotone and Agate: Niedecker's Poetics in "Lake Superior"

Writing of a lake in New Zealand, ecologist Geoff Park notes that "once you know why and what, in terms of time and [specific] landscape history is involved, you can never again read this stretch of country the same" (207). Lorine Niedecker's "Lake Superior" demonstrates a similar attunement to landscape geologically, culturally, and ecologically, and engages with the Great Lakes area through readings and samples of its rocks, literature, motels, and back roads. The poem evolves from a sifting and selection of rock names, features of the lakeshore, and historical quotations for arrangement in a twelve-part fragmented rendition of the extensive research Niedecker conducted about the lake region. This chapter employs the "Notes to Lake Superior" in a close reading of the poem "Lake Superior" as a way to begin to examine Niedecker's poetics and their relationship to a specific environment. Niedecker's attention in the "Notes" to both the landscape of Lake Superior and to the writings of naturalists, explorers, and geologists who write of the lake showcases the relationship between ecology and textuality.

Ecocritic Lawrence Buell notes that eco-writers must demonstrate the "indispensableness of physical environment as a shaping force in human art and experience, and how such an aesthetic works" (Writing 9). Niedecker's own work foregrounds the environment of Lake Superior and its history of geological formation and human use, creating in text an ecotone where the habitat of the lake meets the writing process and text.

Niedecker's ecopoetry in *North Central* engages a mode of poetic inquiry that foregrounds interrelation between landscapes. In natural environments ecotones, or transitional spaces between two adjacent habitats or ecosystems, usually create areas of increased diversity and richness. The generation of unique organisms in these areas,
called the "edge effect" serves as a useful analogy to the products of Niedecker's interaction with and writing of landscapes. The poem "Lake Superior" is a textual product of the interaction between the lake area, Niedecker's research into sources that record its presence, and the poet's own rendition of the region. Examination of the "Notes" reveals a cacophony of presences, including that of carnelian sard, the wild pigeon, sixteenth-century French missionary Marquette, and the agate, that are given equal positions in a textual landscape defined by geologic and historical temporal contexts and shaped by the contours and tributaries of the lake. The Lake Superior bioregion and its geological and historical layers constitute the form of the "Lake Superior" poem, demonstrated by Niedecker's use of recurrence to establish connections and shift meanings, by the instability of the "Notes" and "Lake Superior" texts, and the multiple layers of rock and evolutionary eras it engages through referential coding of material about the lake.

"Archipelago of locales": Construction of the Poem from the "Notes"

One way to conceive of her construction of "Lake Superior" is as an archipelago of word locations, ecotones, in space and time detailing aspects of the lake. Buell asserts that representing a place through a "scattergram or archipelago of locales, some quite removed from one another" (Writing 65) can be one means of constructing a place in a written work. Techniques of fragmentation, assemblage, or mosaic can "intensify] and deepen] the feel of lived experience," (65) he states. In an article on poet Arthur Sze's book Archipelago, Zhou Xiaojing argues that Sze's fractional images and collage composition constitute an ecopoetics of simultaneity and equality among the multiple and
detached phrases (*Ecopoetry* 182). She notes that "collage composition also resists presenting the world through a logically organized sequence that tends to eliminate connections among radically disparate things" (186). As a collage of multiple and disparate materials, "Lake Superior" revives and revises connections between geological and historical accounts of the lake. Niedecker constructs "Lake Superior" out of all the materials she collects, experiences, rewrites, and arranges as if choosing the particular islands to bring to the surface from a large land body underwater. Niedecker's original intention to publish each section of the poem on a separate page "after much culling" (Faranda 101) highlights her conception of the pieces as disconnected elements of a sequence, "placed" in an order that allows them to interact independently and interdependently with one another and the silence and white space between them. As she constructs Lake Superior on paper, the lines, layout, spacing, and other components of textuality become markers of the specific site(s) she details. The poem itself, in its radical condensation of material, retains fragmentary and referential relationships to the "Notes" in the form of brief pieces of language that echo the research as well as construct their own rendition of the place of the lake.

Part of the project of this paper involves outlining the structure of the "Notes," and investigating how they demonstrate an engagement with the landscape of Lake Superior and help us read the poem. The composite "Notes" are an exhaustive compilation or weaving of cross-referenced information. Writing to Cid Corman of her trip in July of 1966 with husband Al Millen to the northern lake, she comments "[y]es!, the Lake Superior trip was a great delight if I can make the poem. Traverse des Millens! A millennium of notes for my magma opus!" (Faranda 94). While several critics of the
piece note the double-pun in this passage of Niedecker's married name Millen and the pervasive geologic nature or "magma" in the piece, readings of the poem have been limited until recently by the relative unavailability of Niedecker's "millennium" of notes, materials, and sources, and hence insights into the processes, of the poem's composition. Comprised of notes copied from books on geology, colonial history, and ecology, newspaper clippings on Lake Superior, the Grand Canyon, and ocean conservation in Oregon and Maui, a personal travelogue, and information about the "folk," towns, rivers, and attractions of the Great Lakes region, the "Notes" delineate multiple stories, from multiple perspectives. This material was then used to compile further drafts and arrangements on smaller scales, eventually leading to drafts of "Lake Superior" and leaving much material, possibly intended for other related compositions, unpublished. As Niedecker's research grew toward the writing of the poem in the summer of 1966, she retyped and rearranged much of this raw material into multiple drafts that experiment with line breaks and editing. Alluding to the source of the Mississippi, which was "located" and named "Itasca" by explorer and government liaison to Native American groups H.R. Schoolcraft in 1832, Niedecker writes: "Is there only one source? You have sources of sources – sources of tributaries ... The pebble has traveled" (Notes 9.5). An insightful critique of the mythology of "True Source" lake and of the idea of a single source for any element of nature (in the context of the lengthy geological processes the research delineates), these lines also serve to characterize Niedecker's composition process and ecological aesthetics. References to multiple characters and discourses recreate the lake in pieces that acknowledge the various sources involved in the evolution of the landscape.
The choreography of compiling and managing such a large volume, nearly 300 pages, requires inventive research acquisitions and tools of composition. Maps, books, conversations, personal journaling, pamphlets, and newspaper articles comprise the bulk of the materials of research. Niedecker sent away for geologic maps from Washington, D.C., as well as for pamphlets about state parks and the Grand Canyon area. She records quotations from a variety of books including those of naturalist Aldo Leopold, H.G. Wells, historian Reuben Gold Thwaites; she took notes from Loren Eisely's *Darwin's Century* (1958), J. Bronowski's *The Common Sense of Science* (1951), the American Lake Series' *Lake Superior* (1944), WPA *Michigan State Guide* (1941), James Gray's *Pine, Stream, and Prairie* (1945), Harlan Hatcher's *The Great Lakes* (1944), Theodore Blegen's *Minnesota, a History of the State* (1963), the Natural Setting series' *Michigan* and *Minnesota* (1940) editions, Walter Havighurst's *The Long Ships Passing* (1942) and *The Great Lakes Reader* (1966), Herman Schneider's *Rocks, Rivers and the Changing Earth: a First Book about Geology* (1952), editions of H.R. Schoolcraft's "Narrative of an Expedition Through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake" (1832) and *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of 30 years with the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers* (1851). The majority of material in the poem condenses and structures collages of text from this research, reading, and note-taking. From this body of notes, she designs composition tools of catalogues, timelines, lists, encyclopedic organization, and hand-drawn maps to aid in the construction and choice of information about the lake. For example, a hand-drawn map of Wisconsin heads a section of notes on geography, geology, and place names, much as a guidebook would provide such a reference. Another research aid, a sheet of paper titled "Lake Superior,"
draws a timeline outlining dates, names, and places or significant facts about explorers of the region from Brule in 1616 as the first white man in the Lake Superior area to the sustained Native American presence in the area as characterized by the 1950 building and naming of the Macinac Bridge (Notes 3.2). A travelogue of her journey around the lake contributes an immediacy and color to the observations and data, positions her as a traveler in the region along with many of the subjects she quotes (including voyageurs, raindrops, and stones), and helps to organize research around particular locales she visited.

Each section of the manuscript participates in the creation in language, through Niedecker's constant review and revision of material, of an interconnected geological, socio-historical, and personal ecosystem of Lake Superior. Section one of "Lake Superior" sets the underlying conceptual tone or "theme" of the poem, which Niedecker identifies as "interrelation" in the most condensed pages of notes on Lake Superior (Notes 9.3). The poem opens by invoking the originary role of rocks in cycles of living matter: "In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock" (Niedecker *Collected* 232). Adapted from the phrase "[i]n every tiny part of any living thing are materials that once were rock that turned to soil," found in *The Rocks, Rivers of The Changing Earth* by Herman and Nina Schneider (83) and copied multiple times in various arrangement in the "Notes," this line is pared in Niedecker's poem to emphasize the ubiquity of elements of rock. Rock in Niedecker's poem participates in every facet of the ecosystem of the lake. In the research notes, Niedecker traces and tracks the transformative nature and changing properties of rocks in the Lake Superior ecosystem by noting the plant extraction of minerals from rocks (Notes 9.1), the parasitic attachment
of lichens to rock (9.4) and cataloguing types of rock found in the area. As well, notes on geologic formation and eras of evolution provide context for the "journey of the rock" (9.1) that Niedecker locates in "every part" of life. Echoing and further focusing the relationship of rocks and life in the second couplet, "In blood the minerals / of the rock," Niedecker rhymes the common element in all life as she acknowledges the presence of minerals in the veins / bodies of humans and animals. In a marginal note beside the passage in Schneider's book from which the opening line of "Lake Superior" was adapted, Niedecker writes "and we eat plants and animals," making the connection clear between all species (Notes 2.9.2). These couplets establish the "bedrock" of the poem in rock, and in materials collected and adapted from research sources.

Rephrasing the concept of interconnection in terms of a specific mineral, section two establishes iron as "the common element of earth / in rocks and freighters" (Niedecker 232). In the movement from earth to freighter, Niedecker prepares us for the second part of the section, which details a view of Sault Saint Marie's "coal-black and iron-ore-red" ships. Evoking both colors of the freighters and suggesting their respective cargos, the precise descriptions here are extracted from Niedecker's observations of such ships from Brady Park near Sault Ste. Marie where she witnessed one freighter carrying 23,000 tons of iron ore from Lake Superior (Notes 1.1.4). Invoking the transfer of goods, trade, the region's mining history, the uses of iron and other minerals toward various economic purposes, Niedecker carefully constructs these lines in a textual "edge effect" so that the reader experiences the act of perceiving the boats through their colors at the same time as understanding the prevalence and value of iron in the area. As the waters work together "internationally" with "[g]ulls playing both sides" in the third part of
section two, the land and water are interrelated in geologic composition, trade of goods, water currents, and within Sault Ste. Marie itself as the city exists on the border between Canada and the United States. The term "international" also suggests the multiple presences of explorers, colonizers, First Nations, and Native American groups whose languages and writings define the shifting portrayals and uses of this landscape since the lake formed. Niedecker's choice of iron in this section to demonstrate both the interconnectedness of the Lake Superior landscape and the economy of shifting resources allows us to glimpse large and lengthy historical and geologic processes in the brevity of her condensed lines.

Condensation and Selection: Dynamics of Language and Line

Niedecker identifies her "condensery" as a vocation in "Poet's Work," writing "Grandfather / advised me: / Learn a trade // I learned / to sit at desk / and condense // No layoff / from this /condensery" (Collected 194). Niedecker's condensation of language, or brevity and conciseness of line, is a characteristic feature of much of her later work; "From This Condensery" is, for example, used as the title of Robert J. Bertholf's edition of Niedecker's poems. Condensation as a poetic process in this paper also refers to the transformation of an element such as iron into various organisms and trading systems. Condensation also denotes the change of a gas or vapour to a liquid, or water from humid air collecting as droplets or precipitation; this changing of form is analogous to the translation of a natural environment into language and the process by which wood becomes the paper to write on. The intersections of these processes of formation and textual construction mark the coordinates of the ecotone, and Niedecker's condensing is
the process by which the organisms of the ecotone become clear. Niedecker's condensation of material in "Lake Superior" reflects the processes of water and rock formation and transformation that she concentrates on in the "Notes." In the most interwoven and "condensed" section of the "Notes," for example, Niedecker improvises on a frequent phrase in the manuscript—"a raindrop is itself for only a moment"—by adding "arrived in Itasca / in the rain." This addition suggests both the tenor of a personal journey to the source of the Mississippi and the natural process in which raindrop momentarily becomes the "true source" itself as it feeds the lake which feeds the river (Notes 9.4). Humorous renditions of natural process such as "[m]arriage – lichens and rock – balance of / nature – triangle in fact – rain water dissolving minerals in / the rock so lichens can get 'em" join more didactic notes such as "for hundreds of thousands of years immense flows of lava covered the / site of Lake Superior and the region immediately surrounding / in the interbedded conglomerate copper formed" (9.4). The archipelago of the poem is constructed through the filtering, cutting, and sifting of such information so as to transform it into a poem that highlights the processes that connect the rocks and minerals of the lake to the humans that navigate its waters.

Niedecker opens section three of the poem with one name: Radisson. A French fur-trader in the early years of European exploration and evangelism, Pierre Esprit Radisson's journey in 1694 from Quebec to the "unmapped western shores" of Lake Superior and into the Mississippi was the first of frequent trading brigades into this area (Havighurst Long Ships 18). Niedecker quotes Radisson's description of the Great Lakes region in her notes as "a laborinth of pleasure . . . [.] the country so pleasant and fruitful and beautiful it grieves me to see ye world could not discover such inticing (sic) countries
(sic) to live in" (Notes 9.2). Niedecker's selection of specific names, words and particularly this line of Radisson's for the last draft of the poem perhaps reflects her practices of quotation in her later work that involve reading masses of material and using in poems the phrases that rise to the fore of the mind\textsuperscript{10}. As well, it demonstrates my sense of the construction of the poem as an archipelago of signs that invite the reader to explore the territory of the language further. Many of the connections between historical events, processes, persons, and geologic features are removed in the poem itself, although connections are implied by the poem's arrangement as a sequence, and its declaration of interrelation in the first section. The story of Radisson, for example, told in Niedecker's "Notes" recalls in detail the occasion surrounding his death, "bound . . . to a stake for slow killing" by the Mohawk tribe who were the enemies of Radisson's Sioux allies, as well as a colonial context wherein Knife Lake is said to have been so named "because Radisson gave [the Sioux] the first steel knives any had ever seen" (Notes 9.2). The version of "Lake Superior" Niedecker edited for \textit{North Central} reads:

Radisson:
"a laborinth of pleasure"
this world of the Lake

Long hair, long gun

Fingernails pulled out
by Mohawks. \textit{(Collected 232)}

This pared-down portion of historical information emphasizes Radisson's participation in the "world of the Lake" and his contact with Native American groups. The connections between his trading practices, his possession and gifts of weapons, and his death are clearer with a greater understanding of his biography. However, Niedecker chose to
eliminate overt explanations and highlight particular details, like small islands on the
surface of an archipelago, which render a vision of the pleasure and danger present in the
human passages and trading routes of the Lake. Niedecker's notation of Lac Court
Oreilles, where Radisson and his brother-in-law Grossiellers spent the winter of 1659-
1660 includes the detail, that "a trail led long after these men were dead and gone" to the
locale in Sawyer Co., Wisconsin (Notes 6.1). The construction of Niedecker's "Lake
Superior" similarly retains signposts and routes that guide us out of the poem into further
reading of history and geology, while it simultaneously remains operative in and among
its own moving relations, signifiers, objects, and images in text. What is partially buried
in "Lake Superior" are the networks and evolutions of language, processes of glacial
retreat and colonization, and labyrinth of "Notes" used to compose the piece.

Methods of composition such as attention to spatiality and sound of the lines of
the poem are partially evident through comparison of lines from the poem and of the
"Notes," which contain so much more information and explication. Canoes appear
throughout her "Notes" in references to Native American and First Nations
transportation, as well as in colonial fur-trading expeditions, though the "Birch Bark"
quotation of section four is derived from the words of fur trapper and trader Peter Pond.
In a lengthy historical section of "Notes," Niedecker transcribes:

More about furs – in 1773 Peter Pond entered the St. Peter's (Minnesota)
River . . . He counted [in Prairie du Chien] 130 canoes, some from
Mackinac and some from as far away as New Orleans. His description
of the canoes themselves: 'hundred wate appease all made of Birch Bark
and white Seder for the Ribs. (Notes 1.2 and endnote)"
In a separate folder of "Notes" labeled "Important," Niedecker indicates Pond's statement by two checkmarks in the margin (9.6). Here she further cuts and arranges the text into three lines intentionally broken in an experiment of verse.

Pond: "Hundred wate appease all made of Birch Bark and white Seder for the Ribs" to Prairie du Chien from New Orleans and Mackinac Games with the Indians – (Notes 9.6).

Niedecker's manipulation of the manuscript, as demonstrated in the arrangement of these quoted lines in the most cohesive section of "Important" notes, involves editing, condensing, and utilizing space on the page. Line breaks between the phrases and caesuras within two of the lines enable Niedecker's condensation and spatial improvisation. This process of construction emphasizes the line as a distinct unit of meaning in Niedecker's work; she composes in phrases rather than in sentence structure or narrative cohesiveness. Following specific lines of the research notes through their evolutionary processes of construction evidence methods of lineation centered on particular details tied together by sound. As Niedecker arranges the body of the boat for the poem in a tercet

Birch Bark
and white Seder
for the ribs (Niedecker 233)

under the right justified heading "The long / canoes," the spacing focuses attention on the objects and nouns in each individual line. The plural of the subtitle recalls Pond's observations of 130 canoes from many locations converging for trade, but Niedecker submerges the larger context, shifts the title to a position of less prominence, and emphasizes the materials of the canoes in alliterative simplicity. Repetition of the "b,"
"r," and "s" sounds creates a cohesive, concise structure, "building" and mirroring the symmetry of canoe in language by rhyming the "r" in "bark," "seder," and "rib"; "rib" also accentuates the symmetry through sounding the reverse of the first three letters of the section. Birch and cedar also invoke the tall, straight, rib-like trees found near Lake Superior and in eliminating the context of fur trading from the section but keeping the names of trees, Niedecker calls attention to the bioregion of the Lake as a formative structure for the poem.

Signs as Shifting and Multiple Referents

Further excavation into the ecotone where Lake Superior meets Niedecker's text reveals multiple presences beneath the signs the poet chooses and arranges for the poem. The opening couplet of section five, "[t]hrough all this granite land / the sign of the cross," partially describes the simultaneity of constitutive igneous rock and a pervasive legacy of Christian missionaries (predominately early Jesuit explorers) in the area (Niedecker 233). On the first page of her condensed notes marked "Important," four marginal notes identify four "signs" in the typed text. The first, labeled "sign 1," notes "an arrowed rest room sign" at the Soo in front of freighters; the second sign identifies a "MOOSE CROSSING" sign; the third, handwritten, notes "the sign of / the agate shop" (Notes 9.1). Sign four, also handwritten in the margins, is "sign of the cross – / telephone poles / of Soo" (Notes 9.1). That the origin of this image of the cross may be related to the sight of telephone poles along the road around the lake, as well as linked to three other literal signs providing information to travelers, demonstrates the web of interaction, like power lines, among the textual lines of this lake region. Inter-relation between signs as markers
of place and signs as signals or symbolic referents meet here in the word "sign"; the poem suggests a meta-poetic awareness of the word as referring to an object and to the process in language of becoming that object. Words such as "sign" that Niedecker chooses to represent the Lake Superior area are invitations for analysis of latent relationships between objects. In his analysis of "Lake Superior," Douglas Crase points out that the cross symbol was used to mark mission sites on early maps, and is used to mark granite on geological maps today (Penberth 13). The "sign of the cross," then, links the poem to the lake as a marker of its prevalent granite rock and of landmarks like the agate shop and the moose crossing that identify particular stones and animals along the lake edges. The final line of the section, "Beauty: impurities in the rock" defines beauty as a sign for the cracks, crags, spots, cuts in rock that create the color, variety, the "splotches and flows of / pink-red" (9.1) in granite, or the variegated characters of individual agates. The multiple and inter-related meanings suggest connections among objects in the landscape, among the geography and geology, and suggest ways to read the poem: through excavations into the "Notes," toward further reading about the "Lake Superior," and with a critical eye and ear for the echoes among the signs and lines and how they reflect the landscape.

Considering briefly a component of the "Notes," the composition of five booklets of poetic experimentation and references to a body of catalogued information (titled on cover pages as "Minn. Alphabetized," "Ontario p.11," "Agates," "Milw. Shoreline," and "Schoolcraft,"), may help clarify Niedecker's construction of brief phrases with multiple and buried meanings. The five booklets allow us to survey the preparation of the poem "Lake Superior" as well as identify a key characteristic of both the "Notes" and the
condensed poem: the use of mnemonic and coded reference. On one page of the booklet "Minn. Alphabetized," the phrase "La Sueur /// p. 19" serves as a coding or mnemonic for the information on the town of La Sueur collected on page nineteen of her encyclopedic collection, but also projects from the center of the page a simplicity characteristic of Niedecker's revision process (Notes 7.1.8). The phrase "northshore L.S.," solitary in the top right corner of one page also suggests a coding, an intentional placement based on geographic positioning, or possibly a blank page reflecting a lack of information collected about this area (Notes 7.1.4). Cryptic references such as "River entered by Peter Pond in 1773. p. 26" (Notes 7.1.9) record the poet's indices of information and invite further excavation by a reader. Summaries of large paragraphs of notes in only a few words, such as the page titled "Traverse des Sioux / State Park," which tells a two-hundred-year story of the place in four brief lines with page references (Notes 7.1.18), experiment with spacing and line breaks as well as referential notation.

The multiple meanings and layers of information that the poem refers to and leaves out or buries are also present as the poem's bedrock, and suggested in the connections between objects and characters such as Peter Pond and the Sioux. Due to the comparative brevity and fragmented body of "Lake Superior," the concept of this referential coding encourages readings that investigate further the sources of the Lake and the poem.

Ascertaining the origins or tributaries of lines and the multiple, latent meanings buried among the sections of "Lake Superior" demonstrates Niedecker's incorporation of what is forgotten about the historical and geological evolutions of the area into her process and product of composition. She demonstrates both the interaction between land and persons and the predominance and precedence of geologic and ecological cycles that
humans participate in. Observing the continual shifting, mixing, and changing through her reading and experience of the lake region, Niedecker notes that "[t]he North [west] is one vast, massive, glorious corruption of rock and language . . ." (Notes 9.1). The underlying current of the poem is precisely this infusion of geology, a grand "corruption" and inter-relation of all life; "Lake Superior" as ecotone between lake and text exhibits such inter-relation. Sections six and seven of the poem reveal interactions, exchanges, and transference among rock and human relations. Marquette, a Jesuit priest who voyaged in the Lake Superior region and built a chapel at St. Ignace, died and was buried in 1675 on a journey to the Mississippi. His bones were exhumed a year later by Native American friends who, according to St. Ignace priest Claude Dablon's account, "cleaned the bones and exposed them to the sun to dry; then, carefully laying them in a box of birch-bark, they set out to bring them to our mission of St. Ignace. There were nearly 30 Canoes which formed, in excellent order, that funeral procession" (Havighurst 22). Juxtaposing a lexicon of "azoic rock," the rock created 3000-5000 million years ago as the earth formed, and "hornblende granite / basalt," types of igneous rock as the "common dark" of the earth, with historical information about the Jesuit mission, makes Marquette's bones that much more brittle and involved in the flux and flow that their river journey signifies. Niedecker's parenthetical aside that his bones are composed "of such is coral" alludes both to Shakespeare's "of his bones are coral made" (The Tempest 1.2.401) as well as her note from The Rocks, The Rivers of the Changing Earth that "[y]our teeth and bones were once coral" (Notes 1.1; Schneider 171), grounding a literary allusion in a physical transformation.
The dislocation and relocation of Marquette's decomposing bones and the human relationship that incited their re-burial at his chosen spot also characterizes the lines of section five of the poem, headed "Joliet." Verbs of action and descriptions of movement locate the French explorer in multiple territories: the Mississippi, Hudson Bay, Labrador, Quebec. As Joliet enters the Mississippi, he finds "the paddlebill catfish / come down from The Age of Fishes" (Collected 234). Underlying this observation lie details of evolution from Niedecker's research of the Devonian Period, also known as the Age of Fishes, which began 325 million years ago and lasted 65 million years (Notes 8.1) and was characterized by volcanic activity, wingless insects and spiders, fern forests, mosses and horsetails, and the paddlebill catfish. Development of flora and fauna in this era, as located by Joliet, mirrors the development of language as the explorer converses in "in latin / with an Englishman" in Hudson Bay (Collected 234) and participates in the simultaneously anachronistic and present elements of "rock and language" the area fosters. Niedecker forges the connection in her poem between the Devonian age and an age of language-using animals through the persona of Joliet in order to demonstrate the continual evolutionary shift of the region and how elements and organisms from seemingly separate ages still interact. The "Lake Superior" poem invites us to do this research, to locate and excavate the connections and tributaries that formed the region and the poem.

Further demonstrating the region's "corruption of rock" in text, section eight of "Lake Superior" traces the names of jewels, noting color and process of rock composition in a verbal collage. Naming the precious stones on short lines creates, through brevity and enjambment, a rapid movement and sifting of sounds and signs. The process of
limestone changing to lazuli is partially demonstrated here through Niedecker's choice and alignment of alliterative rocks. Niedecker prepares the reader for his or her own perception of the stones through the immediacy and the specific image "glow-apricot red-brown" of carnelian sard. Invoking the history of language and biblical journey in the process of rock identification, "[g]reek named / Exodus-antique" (234) the section closes by locating the movement of one jewel in "America," the "mind," and the "toes."

Through her process of juxtaposition and shifting movements, this section prepares and constructs its final word "agate" in a mirror of the condensed form of the entire piece. Agate, then, is a referent and an aim, an element of the ecotone, an object chosen for prominent display in this sequence of collected rocks, and a moment in a long process.

**Recurrence and Relation**

The structure of the "Notes," and construction of "Lake Superior" demonstrates an interconnectedness characteristic of an ecosystem, with continual repetition, rearrangement, and recurring ideas. Niedecker's sketches her ideas on "recurrence" in an early essay on Louis Zukofsky's poetry, where she writes: "Technically, a recurring thing, for all but the apathetic student, is never the same—though the idea of recurrence is useful to establish relationships, to reveal kinship. There were journeys through past hells, heavens—flowing rivers still navigable by degrees" ("The Poetry" 189). She writes of "A" that it "presents an order of succession but also of interweaving themes uniting with new and related matter," and this assessment could well be given to her poetics as she employs recurrence to depict relations between granite and language, trading centers and trees. Recurrence, for the purposes of this paper, refers to the repetition of specific
words in different contexts to construct relationships and suggest connections and shift meanings between seemingly disparate elements in the lake bioregion. For example, the "long" of Radisson's hair and gun and the "long" of the "long canoes" in sections three and four of the poem link Radisson's story and shape to the shape of the canoes and their subsequent link to the natural environment of the lake that includes the birch tree.

Subtitled "Wild Pigeon," section nine of "Lake Superior" demonstrates ecological relationships among birds, stones, and humans of the lake region through language and Niedecker's employment of "recurrence." The lines "Did not man / maimed by no / stone-fall // mash the cobalt / and carnelian / of that bird" illustrate the colors of the feathers and flesh of the pigeon in tones of mineral and semi-precious stone. Cobalt is a hard silvery-white magnetic metal (Oxford 274), while Niedecker transcribes a description of carnelian in her "Notes" as a form of quartz named from the Latin "carneus" or flesh-like, and parenthetically adds "a brilliant kind of flesh-rust" (Notes 2.7). Using these terms to portray the bird aligns the pigeon visually, textually, and aurally with these specific rocks, and also recalls the presence of mineral and rock traces within its body and blood. Further, the "carnelian" tone of the bird's flesh echoes the "carnelian sard" of the previous stanza, creating an instance of "recurrence" of an image transformed by new context into new significance. Niedecker's employment of this repetition endows the word "carnelian" with the color of flesh, the properties of blood, the capabilities of changing rock, and also reinforces the poem's theme of inter-relation among the disjointed stanzas and multiple elements of "Lake Superior." Recurrence, evident in repeated words such as "rock," "iron," "long," "granite," "birch bark," "common," "cross," and "stone" within and among sections connects the disparate pieces of the poem and expands the meanings and
resonances of each word in the process. By demonstrating in section nine the inter-
relation between rock and bird, bird and other sections of the poem, the role of man here,
"maimed by no / stone-fall" becomes weighted with the choice, that accompanies power,
to act responsibly. This conscientious choice can transfer to other sections of the poem,
and outside of the poem in relations to the earth.

Sources of the "Notes": Further Demonstration of Method

Investigation into the primary texts of Niedecker's research material helps further
elucidate her practices of quotation and composition of line. Section ten of "Lake
Superior" collects and adapts text from Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's writings on his 1832
expedition to Lake Itasca, Doty's records of a journey to Lake Superior in 1820, Walter
Havighurst's and Harlan Hatcher's histories of the Lakes, and information from sources
such as the WPA Michigan Writer's Project guide to the state. Opening with a list of
items and characters embarking in 1820 on an expedition to investigate the sources of the
Mississippi, Niedecker pares this stanza of "canoes / US pennants, masts, sails / chanting
canoemen, barge / soldiers—for Minnesota" (Collected 235) from notes she takes about
Schoolcraft and company's departure "with three canoes complete with masts, sails, a US
pennant on each one, chanting canoe-men and accompanied by a 12-oar barge and 22
soldiers" (Notes 1.A.9). The route of this and later expeditions runs along the south shore
of Lake Superior past the rock formations known as the Pictured Rocks, and in
Niedecker's transcription of Doty's words, past the Chocolate River, which is "15 miles
from the laughing fish river and three miles farther is the river of the dead" (1.A.9.
Endnote VIII). The extensive annotation of research notes with information from several
sources about the development of the Pictured Rocks site and the awe of travelers in their presence speaks to Niedecker's fascination with the natural land and water formation.

Niedecker's interaction with the research material is evident in the lines "Passed peaks of volcanic thrust / Hornblende in massed granite," (235) which she arranges from her booklet "Schoolcraft." Quoting and commenting on Doty's record of the 1820 expedition, she writes: "Doty: 'Large, confused masses of granite is interspersed into hornblende', (sic) all peaks thrown up by some volcanic action, one would think" (Notes 7.B.3). Niedecker's amalgamation of material continues as she combines Harlan Hatcher's description of the twenty-five mile stretch of Cambrian rock stratified, hardened, cut, and colored through time "from the soluble mineral oxides which the waves and the rains have dissolved and used to tint the formations of the escarpment" (Hatcher 20) and Doty's observation "a green like that running from copper" (Notes 1.9 [8]) among the rocks to render the Painted Rocks as concentrated, condensed perception.

The line breaks and enjambment here accentuate the movement and continual shift in the process of the rocks' construction, and the selection of stark, strong verb and nouns as end-words announce the crash of rock and water with hard sounds against soft tones.

Niedecker's research from Walter Havighurst's The Long Ships Passing (1942) further develops this Painted Rock sequence, shifting to a delineation of human response to the cliffs and cavernous areas. Havighurst notes:

Sailing their birchbark fleets past Grand Portal, the Chippewas threw gifts of venison and deerskin into the mysterious grottos. Even the French, bringing shrewd trade and new gospel to the savages, felt the power of that mythology. Many a voyageur crossed himself and tossed a twist of tobacco into the great portal as his canoe passed under the cliffs of legend. Some of them carried snakeroot, the Chippewa charm to keep one safe on a journey. (48)
In *North Central*, the lines "Sea-roaring caverns— / Chippewas threw deermeat / to the savage maws / 'Voyageurs crossed themselves / tossed a twist of tabacco in" employ Havighurst's words in a depiction of human reaction to the roaring shores of the lake. Niedecker's portrayal, through quotation, condensation, and fragmentation, of the Painted Rock material emphasizes the deferential and reverent attitudes with which travelers in the region approached the natural geology and lake geography.

The final two stanzas of section ten characterize Schoolcraft's second expedition in search of the source of the Mississippi, in 1832, in which he and his companions ventured and portaged through northern Minnesota and located and named Lake Itasca as the "true source," from the Latin "veritas caput." The lines "Inland then / beside the great granite / gneiss and the schists" Niedecker adapts from her notes on the "knobs of granite and gneiss (Ortonville and Big Stone City and near Sapanga Lake). The great schists of St. Louis and Itasca Counties are lava flows changed by the mountain-building process" (Notes 1.A.11. Endnote VII). These lines are perhaps the most-repeated in all of the Notes, appearing multiple times in various forms; for example, the phrases occur twice in the booklet "Minn. Alphabetized," three times in the booklet "Schoolcraft," and once in the booklet "Agates"(Notes 7.A, B, C). The phrase is a mantra throughout the composite research notes, shifting only in the final drafts ("TRAVELERS: Lake Superior Region" and "Lake Superior") to its final rearrangement of "great granite" instead of "great schists." Schoolcraft's notation of the expedition provides the "source" for Niedecker's condensation of the journey in the final lines of section ten. Schoolcraft writes,

> We were twenty-four minutes in crossing this latter lake, and found its inlet to be connected with four other smaller *lakes of a pondy character, redolent with nymphae odorata, through which we successfully passed,*
and debarked at the head of the last lake on a shaking bog, being the
commencement of portage Ple . . . Little Vermillion (Tenth) Lake. The
growth on the banks of this lake is birch and aspen, with pines in the
distance. We were twenty minutes in passing it. The outlet is full
doubled in width, and free from the embarrassments encountered above.
Tamarack is a frequent tree on the shores, and the pond lilly, flag and
Indian reed, appear in the stream. (Mason 64-66; my italics)

Niedecker extracts words (noted in my italics) from this account so that the final part of
section ten reads: "to the redolent pondy lakes' / lilies, flag and Indian reed / 'through
which we successfully / passed" (Collected 236). She rearranges and weaves
Schoolcraft's text according to her attention to sound, rhythm, and condensed ordering of
images so that the language is redolent of the voyager and characteristic of the poet.

The final two sections, eleven and twelve, of "Lake Superior" introduce an "I" to
the poem for the first time beyond the "my" of the toes that held the agate in section
eight. In the lines of section eleven, the speaker visits "true source park" and lifts a stone
while noting that the leaf beside it also contained "stuff that once was rock." Knowledge
of this geologic process both dwarfs the "I" in the stanza and constructs it as a part of an
inter-related cycle on a lengthy evolutionary scale in the face of which there is no "hurry"
for home. Gaps, fragments, and absences in the final section twelve locate a speaker who
"missed" or cannot remember Sand Lake, though her "dear one" reminds her of watching
a gopher there. "Sand" Lake is Niedecker's revision for precision of sound and rhythm of
"Sandy" Lake, which historically was a seat of Native American power, then a key locale
for trading19, and served as the departure point for Schoolcraft's expedition to Lake
Itasca20. As well, Doty's account of the lake describes it as "surrounded by sand and
gravel in which [he] found great numbers of cornelians (sic), agates and jaspers . . ."
(Notes 6.36). From these last two stanzas, the reader is able to align the poem with
Niedecker and her husband Al Millen's journey around Lake Superior in July 1966; although several important early critics of the poem have noted the trip as an impetus and germination period for the poem, this reading of the journey as the source of the poem can mislead a reader. The multiple layers and tributaries of stories, geological and ecological processes, and human interactions with the lake region exceed the ego of an "I" poem in both the extensive research notes and in the deliberate construction of the poem in disconnected and inter-related sections.

Niedecker's method of multiple revisions and rearrangement of sections and phrases reveals an intentional fragmentation and an unstable text. This instability reflects the continually shifting process of geologic formation and human occupation of "Lake Superior" that Niedecker both read of and witnessed. As an ecopoem, "Lake Superior" resists static closure or the authority of a "final version," as demonstrated in the varied drafts and revisions within the "Notes" as well as in the publication of "TRAVELERS: Lake Superior" before the version in North Central. Niedecker's ecopoetics operate in contradistinction to a New Critical aesthetic or poem as a "well-wrought urn" and in tune with the materials of the lake with which she engaged. Naming the poem "Lake Superior" implies a construction of place, which occurs spatially on the page in the use of textual space, an internal mapping of specific locales, and in terms of the coding or referential markers that I argue many of her phrases embody. Niedecker's expedition in language through the region of Lake Superior is incomplete and replete with varied voices including those of granite and Cambrian rock. The "journeying, the mixing, the changing" (Notes 9.1) that she attends to in composition method and poetic form reflect
and define the multiplicity and inter-connectedness that forms the ecotone where her text meets the lake region.

---

1 Niedecker's "Notes" comprise nearly 300 pages of research and reading notes, catalogues of information about the Great Lakes, Grand Canyon, and Midwest lake areas, as well as pages of condensation of this material and pages of prose and poetry that gather "Lake Superior" material found in the North Central version of the poem. The "Notes" were found after Niedecker's death and held in the private collection of Gail and Bonnie Roub. Recently the "Notes" were donated to the Hoard Museum in Ft. Atkinson, Wisconsin for public use. Jenny Penberthy has edited and published several sections of the manuscript, for example: one in Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet (1996), one in Sulfur (Winter 2000) and one in Facture (2002). I would like to acknowledge my sincere thanks to Dr. Penberthy who very generously lent me a copy of the manuscript for research purposes.

2 It is interesting to note that in the context of the Great Lakes, humans have likely been a shaping force in the development, or at least resource consumption since the lakes developed relatively recently (12,000 years ago) as a result of glacier reduction in the area. Eco-critic William Ashworth notes that "since the oldest human artifacts found in North America date from before 12,000 years ago, it is safe to say that human cultures witnessed the birth of the Great Lakes and all the subsequent changes in their geography, from the Chippewa-Stanley Low-Water Stage 9,5000 years ago to the Nipissing High-Water Stage five millennia later" (20).

3 The "Notes" evidence an instability in their multiple repetition and revision of phrases. As well, the poem was first published as "TRAVELLERS / Lake Superior Region" in Arts and Society 4.3 (Fall/Winter 1967): 508-13. Niedecker also mentions an early draft of the poem called "CIRCLE TOUR" in a letter to Morgan Gibson October 6, 1966, though no draft remains (Collected 434).

4 In a letter to Corman of October 13, 1966 Niedecker notes she has finished the "Lake Superior" poem "after much culling but [she] might just make a small book of it with a short poem on each page" (Faranda 101).

5 There seems to be collections of notes particularly surrounding the Grand Canyon, Michigan and Minnesota folk, Native American life, and possibly other topics that diverge from the Lake Superior project.

6 Niedecker's work on the WPA Writer's Project's Wisconsin book (1941) may have provided a model for this type of research; it certainly would have acquainted her with the geography, geology, culture, and "folk" of the entire state in which she lived.

7 Also attached to this stapled booklet of notes are notes on Glacier National Park likely from the address at the bottom of the page: Glacier Natural History Assoc., West Glacier, Montana 59936. The note that follows suggests she sends for other pamphlets: "Might get Nature Trails, Trick Falls, Swiftcurrent, Trail of the Cedars, Hidden Lake Overlook 10c each. Also Guide to Going to the Sun Rd. Beatty 35c". The date of handwritten note below this "sent for Trick Falls and (arrow to "Going to the Sun Rd.) 5 dimes Feb 4 '68" suggests either that this booklet was composed after "Lake Superior," OR that Niedecker wrote this handwritten note on this packet after "LS" was composed. In either case this date suggests that these "Notes" are then certainly a compilation of notes for multiple poems.

8 In the packet of Notes entitled "Lake Superior Country", Niedecker writes, "In Brady Park beside the locks you watch the big ore-carrying ships passing thru and listen to the whistles of the big boats, answered by the place on shore that keeps a watch on the happenings. Some of the long [sea-going X] lake boats have taken on the red color of the iron ore, except for the gleaming white superstructure fore and aft. In the middle is that long, long barge-like body. These freighters bring the iron ore of Lake Superior and the smelting plats in the East together. It was announced on our excursion that 23,000 tons of iron ore was carried by one of the boats just back of us" (Notes 1.1.4). Niedecker's interest in rocks and ore extends to other poet's work on the topic as well. She cites Olson's translation of a poem by Rimbaud that resonates
with her research, writing: "Rimbaud—from / his last ["his latest" crossed out here] recorded / poem Olson took and made / his own— / If I have any taste / it is only / for earth and stones / ______ / Also / Daily I dine on our / rock, coal, iron . . . . " (Notes 5.5).

As well, a section of pages labeled "Sault Ste. Marie" (6.4) include improvisation on the materials of this section and construct the sound of the ships as observer and signifier: "Ship watching here and ship listening. Whistles are a code".

Writing to Kenneth Cox of the composition of her 1970 poem on Jefferson, she writes: "Up very early mornings—nearly killed myself—and all that reading beforehand (until I realized what am I doing?—writing a biography or history?? No, all I could do is fill the subconscious and let it lie and fish up later). The hard part is to keep some quotes but not too many" (Penberthy Correspondence 89). Research by accretion of sources, then, serves Niedecker's poetics as it allows her to absorb the material.

This transcription comes from an unidentified source. In an endnote, Pond's words are quoted in full: "Pond describing Prairie du Chien: 'Planes of the Dogs, the grae place of rondavues for the traders and Indians. . . . This plane is a Very Hansum one . . . All the traders that Youses that Part of the Country & all the Indians of several tribes West fall and Spring where the Greaters Games are Plaid Both by French & Indians. The French practis Billiards—ye latter Ball. Hear the botes from New Orleans cum. They are navigated by thirtey Six men who row as many oarse. They bring in a Boate Sixtey Hogseats of Wine on one. . . besides tham, cheese & c—all to trad with the French & Indians. . . . There was not less than One Hundred and thirtey Canoes which came from Machinaw Caring from Sixtey to Eightey. Hundred wate appease all made of Birch Barck and white Seder for the Ribs ....'" (Notes 1. Endnote 2).

Another example of this spatial and lineal work in the "Notes" occurs in the "Minn. Alphabetized" booklet. The entry on "Hastings, Minn." is taken from a passage in her catalogued "encyclopedia" of notes on the author Ignatius Donnely in the first passage below, and arranged more precisely, according to her objectivist aesthetics, in the second passage. Isolating the lines in a couplet further accentuates the starkness and simple lines of the building and poetic construction.

First house in the state to be built in the Victorian Gothic style. The New England and Greek Revival styles had prevailed until 1860: 15 rooms. Had a square rosewood piano. Cream-colored limestone exterior walls. Simple in a day when simplicity was not a virtue. Front door opening is a Gothic arch. (Notes 6.24)

. . . First house in state
to be built in Victorian Gothic style. 15 rooms.

Had a square rosewood piano. Cream colored limestone.
Simplicity. Front door opening is a Gothic arch. (Notes 7.1.5)

Jenny Penberthy's Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet will be cited as WP in the rest of the thesis.

Through page numbers and fragments of referential phrases, the booklets condense, cite, and rearrange material found in the 36-page encyclopedic collection of notes collected and indexed from the larger "Notes."

Havighurst's Great Lakes Reader includes Claude Dablon's rendition entitled: "Section 3rd. What Occurred at the Removal of the Bones of the Late Father Marquette, Which Were Taken from His Grave on the 19th of May, 1677, the Same Day as That on Which He Died in the Year 1675. A Brief Summary of His Virtues."

Interestingly, the remaining grouping of "Notes" contains little information on Joliet, suggesting further sources and pages constituted the research for the poem and that the "Notes" aren't the only authoritative "source" for the entire piece.

Niedecker's modernist employment of quotation of folk speech, in concert with Zukofsky's and Moore's collages of quotation, and Pound, Eliot, and others' use of classical reference, manifests in this work in her construction of a geography in language and quotation through Cambrian reference and details of human involvement with the watersheds of the cross-border lake area.

As this paper is considering the whole text of North Central, I am using both text version of each of the poems as they appear in North Central and Niedecker's Collected Works (2002) edited by Jenny Penberthy. In letters noting a revision of section ten of "Lake Superior" for the manuscript Niedecker prepared for My Life by Water: Collected Poems, 1936-1968 (London: Fulcrum Press, 1970), she constructs the last two parts of section ten as a separate section eleven. This version is published in the Collected Works, and is

26
the latest and most authoritative version though it differs from that in *North Central*. Since the focus of this paper is on *North Central*, and the material in section ten is thematically and narratively linked, I have chosen to use the section groupings in *North Central* in this instance.

19 Schoolcraft notes: "Sandy Lake has been a post of importance in the fur trade from the earliest French times, being one of the central seats of Indian power on the Upper Mississippi..." (Mason 12).

20 Schoolcraft continues: "At Sandy Lake the expedition made its general arrangements for the route..." (Mason 12).
Moments of Perception: Niedecker's Reflective Poetics

Writing of her journey around Lake Superior in the most condensed section of "Notes to Lake Superior," Niedecker writes: "I spent a week in green / wilderness – road flying thru it, thru cut rock . . . to suppose that – // This is the theme: the going – even in the pause of this day's / century // interrelation // interrelation of peoples, stones, boats" (Notes 9.3). Niedecker identifies the pause in the midst of the motions of traveling and movement of rocks, and locates the theme of the poem as interrelation between all elements of a region, present amidst the "going" and the "pause." Her week in green wilderness clarified the dynamic of interrelation in these lines to include rocks, people, and boats, but also observes that motion and pause play a part in the "theme" of her work as she translates the landscape of Lake Superior into the unique environment of each textual ecotone. Chapter two considers how Niedecker employs the technique and concept of pause, or silence and stillness, into her poetics in order to communicate precise moments of perception of a landscape and interrelation among its elements. The paper will situate Niedecker in a context of 1960's ecopoetic practice and outline how her work contributes to this nascent field: reflective poetics. Several critics have discussed the relationship of Niedecker's reflective work to her early surrealist practice, and this paper acknowledges how her early work infuses North Central by establishing her means of perceiving objects and natural elements. I will then suggest that the poet's reflective methods are also connected to her association with Eastern spiritual writings and alignment with the haiku form. David Gilcrest asserts that haiku "is arguably the most quintessential of ecopoetic forms, parlaying as it does concise moments of unmediated perception grounded in actual time and place" (Ecopoetry 24). Niedecker's reflective ecopoetics
employ this practice, and enable her to locate and render particular places of her Wisconsin bioregion.

As Niedecker conceived of *North Central* as one long poem\(^1\), reading the center section titled "Traces of Living Things" in concert with "Lake Superior" and the final poem "Wintergreen Ridge" reveals relationships between the sections. *North Central* demonstrates the relation that Edouard Glissant, in a post-colonial context, characterizes as a dynamic system of interdependencies (92)\(^2\). Section six of "Lake Superior" on Marquette, for example, was first printed in a grouping of "Traces of Living Things"\(^3\) in *Origin (Collected)* (438). The second of seventeen poems in "Traces" recalls the refrain in "Lake Superior" that all organisms are composed of rock and other pieces of living things by depicting a man who "bends to inspect / a shell / Himself // part coral / and mud / clam" (239). Poem eight of "Traces" anticipates the conservationist call of "Wintergreen Ridge" to experience and preserve northern Wisconsin's Door County region by recommending: "For best work / you ought to put forth / some effort / to stand / in north woods / among birch" (242). These two poems also exhibit "concise moments" grounded in a practice of reflection that requires pause and silence to achieve understanding of the relation of the man to the shell, coral, and mud clam, or to achieve the "best work" that the perceptions standing among birch trees affords the poet\(^4\).

In his essay "Primary Concerns: The Development of Current Environmental Identity Poetry," ecocritic Bernard W. Quetchenbach notes "[c]ontemporary poetry as we know it emerged in the 1950's and 1960's, after a prolonged aesthetic struggle between the 'academic' late moderns and the proponents of a new, open-form, personal, and immediate poetics" (Ecopoetry 245). One way in which this open-form, immediate poetics manifests is in cross-genre research and attention to scientific ecological principles in poetry. Muriel Rukeyser addresses this cross-pollination in The Life of Poetry (1949), stating:

The relations of poetry are, for our period, very close to the relations of science. It is not a matter of using the results of science, but of seeing that there is a meeting-place between all the kinds of the imagination... a poem is not its words or its images, any more than a symphony is its notes or a river its drops of water. Poetry depends on the moving relations within itself. It is an art that lives in time, expressing and evoking the moving relation between the individual consciousness and the world. (Rukeyser ii)

Rukeyser's analysis of the poem as a whole made of parts in shifting relation to one another, with the suggestion that the moving and shifting is what creates the energy of the poem, addresses both the internal structure of a piece and the relationship between the individual and the community at large. She draws parts of her analysis of the relations of poetry from her biographical work on nineteenth-century physicist William Gibbs, whose "phase" theories about the dynamic relationships between objects in three-dimensional space grew into her own theories about poetry.

Developments in the sciences of physics and ecology toward network models "in constant motion, rendered dynamic by interactions that are simultaneously affecting each other" (Hayles 15) coexist with discussions of poetics in terms of open forms that portray
"fields" of relation in language in the 1950's and 1960's. Charles Olson's discussion of composition by field and projective verse, which minimizes the lyrical ego toward a poetics located in the ear and breath of the poet, also notes that a poet's "use" or function is determined by "how he conceives his relation to nature" of which he is a part (Collected Prose 247). Framing the equation in these terms allows us to ask how Niedecker and other poets writing in the period conceive of their relation to nature, and how this relationship translates into verse. Ecopoets in the 1960's drew inspiration from new scientific "field" models of dynamic interaction, systems theories such as that forwarded by Gregory Bateson in *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (1972), as well as Asian spiritual traditions such as Taoism and Zen that are attuned to nature in their writings and practices, Native American epistemologies and approaches to their environments, and their own experiences with soil, mountainous terrain, islands, erosion, pollution, ocean and fresh water habitats, and urban adaptations, and applied all these components to their writing.

Niedecker in the 1960's, particularly in *North Central*, participates in a burgeoning ecopoetic body of work that addresses and manifests ecological ideas about environments and non-anthropocentric relations to nature through poetry, while still maintaining her attention to sound, liberal use of textual space, and spare lines that she developed in her early work. In a letter to Zukofsky of June 1, 1958, Niedecker writes "I require masses and masses of nature these days— little landscapes and wide ones" (Penberthy 247). Penberthy notes that after the period in the 1950's of Niedecker's epistolary "For Paul" series, "[n]ature became one of her explicit subjects, signaling the return of her poetic attention from Zukofsky's New York to her own Black Hawk Island,
Wisconsin" (75). In this (re)turn to nature as a subject, she contributes to the generation of poems that engage with environment and environmental concerns. Ecocritic Leonard Scigaj discusses a "renaissance" of poetry addressing connections to the natural world in the 1960's, particularly with regard to poets A.R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, Merwin, and Gary Snyder, who have been taken up by several contemporary ecocritics as definitive or exemplary representatives of the genre (7). Scigaj notes that in 1965, "Ammons proclaimed that 'ecology, with its centers and peripheries / in motion, / organic, / interrelations' was his formal model" (45) and Bernard Quetchenbach discusses the strategies that Robert Bly, Berry, and Snyder developed to achieve public voices capable of addressing environmental matters by speaking at times "for" nature and raising concerns about twentieth-century human interactions with "natural" environments (x-xi).

It is my contention that because of Niedecker's marginal status in many critical circles, as an avante-garde woman poet, she has been overlooked in the critical recuperation of twentieth-century ecopoets with whom her work can be aligned. Niedecker's poetry resonates with ecopoetry of the 1960's as it evidences Eastern poetic and spiritual influences, intimacy and respectful exchanges with natural environments, processes and cycles, non-anthropomorphic attitudes. Her ecopoetics grows from her attention to processes, colors, sounds, and rhythms in her environment, and evolves through extensive research and dialogue with others. Translation of her observations and perceptions onto pages of text produces an ecopoetry less reliant on the narrative forms many ecopoets employ, and often less concerned with communicating a specific environmental message, but very interested in locating particulars and depicting inter-relation between them. In a letter to Cid Corman on February 18, 1962 she writes "[f]or
me the sentence lies in wait – all those prepositions and connectives – like an early spring flood. A good thing my follow-up feeling has always been condense, condense" (33). Characteristically invoking an unpredictable and recurring natural phenomenon endemic to her Rock River residence, Niedecker demonstrates here an attentiveness to the processes that shape her as a poet and in turn shape her work. She creates poems that don't cultivate or achieve a wide ecologically conscious audience, but nonetheless portray with precision a reflective and condensed relationship with, response to, and manifestation of natural processes, systems, and settings. Her contribution to ecopoetry lies in the creation of her textual ecotones, and engaging readers in the dynamic systems of language and environment from which they develop.

Niedecker's poetry is ecologically oriented as it evidences attentiveness to nuances of birdsong, weather, and particular features of species that locates it in a particular "north" and "central" bioregion. Niedecker depicts her habitat on Black Hawk Island and the Rock River, as well as the northern lake and peninsulas to which she travels in North Central with an intimate knowledge of the ecosystems and with details such as "the mossed / massed quartz / on which spruce / grew dense," which sets the scene for a human relationship in "Traces" (241). In these descriptive lines the amalgamation of quartz, and ground cover of moss and spruce are rendered thick and intertwined by the layering of the repeated "s" and "d" sounds of "mossed," "massed," "spruce," "dense." Niedecker utilizes sound and spacing of line to demonstrate dynamic processes of interdependence while still leaving silence through textual space for organisms and rocks to surface. The last poem of "Traces" demonstrates such an aesthetic and practice: "I walked / on New Year's Day // beside the trees / my father now
gone planted // evenly following / the road // Each / spoke" (Collected 245). As the speaker walks among and listens to the trees, their position as a legacy of the father who planted them becomes multiplied into the generation of a space in which the trees may speak. Integration of the father with the landscape, the speaker's interaction with the trees as she walks, and the trees' location and growth converge in the line "evenly following the road," which refers to each of the subjects (human or tree) in the poem. Gaps and spaces in the spare poem, particularly in the last couplet, articulate with silence the presence of the trees. Words indicating motion such as "walked," "following," and "spoke" (as in the spoke of a wheel turning) suggest cycles in which both the speaker and the trees participate.

The poem "My Life by Water," placed after "Lake Superior" and before "Traces" in the textual geography of North Central, depicts a flood-laden and water-driven landscape. The three-line form of the poem anticipates the three-line stanzas of "Wintergreen Ridge," and the limited number of words on each line (one to four words) aligns the poem with the brevity of line in the "Traces" poems. Carefully controlled through line-breaks and sound repetitions, the three-line stanza in "My Life by Water" begins by announcing "Hear" (Collected 237). Both a marker of the tones of the place, and a sound rhyme with "here," the word locates the place of the poem in the sounds names. The sounds of "Spring's / first frog / or board," and the "Muskrat's / gnawing" opens the "doors / to wild green / arts and letters." Text here springs from the natural sounds surrounding the speaker's shore, where boats point "thru birdstart / wingdrip / weed-drift // of the soft / and serious— / Water" (Collected 238). Rendering the tone of the objects in the sequence of "birdstart / wingdrip / weed-drift" within a two-beat rhythm
establish the speaker's means of knowing the habitat in which the "Life by Water" is lived, through perceiving its sounds and rhythms.

*Reflective Poetics: Origins, States of Consciousness, Perception*

In a letter to Roub on June 20, 1967, Niedecker writes that she is considering "how to define a way of writing poetry which is not Imagist nor Objectivist fundamentally nor Surrealism alone . . . The basis is direct and clear—what has been seen or heard etc. . . .—but something gets in, overlays all that to make a state of consciousness" (*WP* 86).

She notes an affinity with a recent article by Myron Turner on Henry Green and Wallace Stevens¹⁰, and articulates her own position on composition in relation to his work:

> The visual form is there in the background and the words convey what the visual form gives off after it's felt in the mind. A heat that is generated and takes in the whole world of the poem. A light, a motion, inherent in the whole. Not surprising since modern poetry and old poetry if it's good, proceeds not from one point to the next linearly but in a circle. The *tone* of the thing. And awareness of everything influencing everything. (*WP* 86)

This synthesis of her experiments with rendering the tone, color, or rhythms of objects with an interest in generating energy through words and exhibiting interrelation between objects and events forms the core of her "reflections." The poem "Easter Greeting," published in *Origin* (July 1966), demonstrates interrelation through juxtaposition of a handshake and lily, both of which the speaker asserts meet and enrich the body through the mind. She writes: "I suppose there is nothing / so good as human / immediacy // I do not speak loosely / of a handshake / which is // of the mind / or lilies—stand closer—/ smell" (221). The state of mind, one of immediacy, presence, and human connection, is rendered through evocation of the pungent scent of lilies.
Niedecker's "reflective" verse meshes a "direct treatment" of the object in the poem with evocation of the sensory and perceptual components of the poet's experience with the object. Rendering the act of perceiving is a way that Niedecker composes her interaction with environments and creates ecotones in text. The development of Niedecker's poetics of "reflection" or "reflective" poetics (she refers to it in both terms), discussed by several Niedecker scholars (Faranda 1986; Nicholls 1996; Penberthy 1996) involves a shift in the poet's consideration of her own process of composition. In letters to Corman, Gail Roub, and Zukofsky discussing her poetics in the 1960's, Niedecker relays a confluence of her early associations with Objectivist practice, her work with surrealist-influenced "states of consciousness," and new impulses to portray the interrelation and overlapping influences among entities. Peter Nicholls helpfully articulates the connections between Niedecker's early practices and 1960's poetics in the attempt to render phonetic and syntactical shapes of perceived objects, in "a Surrealism of organized sound-shapes rather than of dream" (WP 212). Organization of sound-shapes based on what the poet perceives of a particular locale or landscape facilitates engagement with environments. Niedecker's development of "reflective" verse, then, evolves in part from her 1930's work which attempts to create forms that communicate to the reader the rhythms and sounds experienced in the perception of an object, which can result in juxtaposition, gaps, repetitive sounds, and disordered syntax.

Niedecker's reflective poetics, which she employs in *North Central* to interact with landscapes, invoke the immediacy of first perception of environments, and communicate interrelation between elements of nature, involve in part a "returning" to some of the techniques she employed in her experiments with portraying states of
consciousness in writing. Several poets and literary critics, including Kenneth Cox, Peter Nicholls, and Jenny Penberthy have discussed Niedecker's relationship to surrealism, surmising that she experimented with techniques associated with surrealist practice along with Objectivist principles in her early writing (Cox in Dent 1983; Nichols in Penberthy 1996; Penberthy 1992). In a letter to Cox of December 10, 1966, Niedecker remembers: "there was an influence (from transition and from surrealists) that has always seemed to want to ride right along with the direct, hard, objective kind of writing. The subconscious and the presence of the folk, always there" (Dent 36). In the early 1930's she was particularly interested in demonstrating "states of consciousness," and constructed two tri-partite sequences, ("Canvass," "For Exhibition," "Tea," and "Beyond what," "I heard," and "Memorial Day") the first subtitled "subconscious," "toward monologue," and "social-banal" and the second subtitled "subconscious," "wakeful," and "full consciousness" (Collected 33-34). In Niedecker's letter to Harriet Monroe introducing "Progression," she identifies the three parts of the version she enclosed as (1) "simple knowing and concern for externals," (2) "the turn to one world farther in," and (3) "the will to disorder, approach to dream . . . " (Penberthy WP 178). In further explanation of her theory, she states that a poem should be illogical, as "memory, if made up of objects at all, retains those objects which were at the time of first perception and still are the most strikingly unrecognizable" (178). Critical to Niedecker's discussion of her poetic theory here is the attempt to portray in language the experience of perceiving an object, which she asserts involves an initial opaqueness or uncertainty. She continues by noting that "[i]ntelligibility or readers' recognition of sincerity and force lies in a sense of basic color, sound, rhythm" (178). These evocative components reconstruct the act of
perception, a technique Niedecker uses to locate the sounds, colors, and rhythms of her watery bioregion.

A poem from the North Central period,13 "Bird Singing," emphasizes the tone, color, and rhythm of initial perception as it employs the method of composition she engages with in her early experiments with surrealism:

Bird singing
ringing yellow
green

My friend made green
ring
—his painting—

grass
the sweet bird
flew in. (Collected 220)

As the bird, identified as a prothonotary warbler in earlier drafts, sings in the poem it evokes the sharp, bright qualities of the colors yellow and green in the mind of the poet who often documents the constant birdsong that surrounds her Black Hawk home.

Written upon viewing friend Gail Roub's acrylic painting in 1965 (Collected 431), the poem suggests that the painting renders the song through creating the green color in which invites in the "sweet bird." Niedecker sent three versions of this poem to Roub, identifying version one as "fairly conscious," two "in large part subconscious," and three as "a kind of Mother Goose warbler," noting that in version two, the one she keeps, the bird is "out of the egg and the song before that and the color—" (Collected 432). The version Niedecker chooses is the most concise and stark, drawing the birdsong from the same bioregion that the painter designs on his canvass to render a "concise moment of unmediated perception grounded in actual time and place" (Gilcrest 24).
Reflective Poetics: Compleitive Practice

Niedecker's reflective poems in the 1960's work also with meditative awareness, interplay between silence and sound, and textual pauses to demonstrate and allow for contemplation. Ecocritic David Gilcrest notes how the Asian roots of such practices in ecopoetry are evident in construction of poets such as Merwin and Snyder in central places in the ecopoetic canon (22). "These poets' encounters with Taoist and Zen ideology, practice, and aesthetics, explicitly acknowledged in their work, and exhaustively explicated by their critics," Gilcrest asserts, "offer a much larger cultural context for ecopoetry" (19). Niedecker read and engaged with Taoist, Zen, and haiku texts, and employed contemplative practices in her own writing. Evidence of her reading of Asian contemplative writers surfaces in poems that incorporate direct address, allusion, or discussion of such poets as Basho. Poems like "Basho / beholds the moon / in the water // He is full // at the port / of Tsuruga" (Collected 270) and "Sky / in my favor // to fly / to downtown crowds / home // and Basho / on my mind" infuse Niedecker's considered observations of nature as in the lines: "You see here / the influence / of inference // Moon on rippled / stream" (228), that reflect the moonlight on water, the speaker's inference of the bright moon upon seeing its reflection, and reflect Basho's observations of stillness in nature.

In letters to Corman in 1966-67 while composing North Central, Niedecker explains how she is "going into a kind of retreat" to write "Lake Superior," (93), how there is "no better poetry than the quiet" (101). In response to Basil Bunting's queries about reading poems aloud, an action Niedecker felt contributed to greater drama or
heightened prose which detracts from the "tight, perfect kind of poetry" (121), she writes: "Would somebody would start Meditation Rooms, places of silence, so silent you couldn't help but hear the sound of your page without opening your mouth" (127). Niedecker's daughter-in-law Julie Schoessow remembers that Niedecker once became upset at a surprise family visit that interrupted her writing, and that "[s]he had intense concentration. When she was writing, she was writing . . . [her husband Al] would leave the house and work in the garden" (WP 74). Gilcrest explains that through the exercise of "quieting the mind, silencing the chatter of language, repudiating its propensity for attachment and discrimination, one experiences loss of self and a concomitant ecstatic synthesis in the world" (19) which translates into an aesthetic record of "the intuitive moment, the gesture toward presence" (20). Niedecker employs both a quieting and listening as she writes, and then incorporates this contemplative and introspective perspective and the perceptions it affords into her poems which leave space for the reader to experience and sound the connections between the objects and events in silence. Her reflective poems create the circumstances wherein the reader may experience the quality and precision of perception of the objects in the poem.

Niedecker's connections with Japanese poetry were partially facilitated by her correspondence with Corman; it is through Origin that she read of the contemporary Japanese poet Shimpei Kusano, for example, whose liberal use of periods as endstops or breaks in lines particularly interested her. On May 13, 1963, she writes of receiving Corman's translation of Kusano's Selected Frogs (1963): "so frog-green. The periods (dots) are the frogs singing silently." Relating the sound of frogs to her own environment [note her frog poems], she continues: "We have frogs here now and sora rails giggling"
Several of Niedecker's own poems speak of the Black Hawk Island frog noise, such as in "Frog noise / suddenly stops // Listen! / They turned off / their lights" (Collected 203). In this concise poem, the noise of frogs is marked by attention to their silence, which Niedecker constructs also as a darkness and punctuated with an exclamation point.

On March 2, 1967 Niedecker writes of Kusano in Origin 3.4 (January 1967): "Those periods—as tho the frog jumps and then sits a moment to allow us to meditate" (114).

Lines such as Kusano's "wind. rain. lightning. sleet. snow. blizzard. // quietness." or "half the day beside him breath aches then / takes a dip. / sounds of bliss pierce her belly. / tears well to her throat." (Kusano Origin 35, 14), continually broken by periods both within lines and at their ends, require pauses and a slow and considered reading practice, one that generates the possibility for the reader to fully absorb and experience interconnection between elements in the poem.

Niedecker's responses to the form and "singing" silence of Kusano's frog poems, and to Basho's "hard and clear" lines that reveal connections between words contribute to our understanding of the relation in her own writing between pause, sound, and precise composition. "If your ear is acute," she writes to Corman, "you sound your poem in silence" (121). Silence functions as a base for sound in Niedecker's compositions conditioned by a meditative listening to the bird-song, frog rattle, car honk, rising flood waters, or voices of friends and family she engaged with. In the most condensed pages of Niedecker's "Notes to Lake Superior," she writes of rocks that "[t]hey decay to form something else. Momentary equilibrium, / coming to rest (Lake Plantagenette (The Rest in the Path) during which we name it" (Notes 9.3). The process of naming here relies on pause as in the land spaces between northern lakes, and as in the silence between speech
or writing and sounds of a natural environment. Naming, as a metaphor for writing, involves the attempts of explorers, scientists, and artists to portray and classify objects and elements that are in perpetual motion and transition and thereby always changing. Reflective composition proposes to name or convey moments of perception. Later in this section of "Notes," Niedecker comments: "Why this fascination with rock terms, name, probably because we / like to think the first geologists took their finds and created /them – name to thing – out of the nature of things – plus sometimes their sound or reflection of colour that delighted their senses" (Notes 9.9). Recalling Niedecker's 1930's poetic desiderata of portraying sound, color, and rhythm in a poem to render the conditions and energy of initial perception, this yoking of naming with the delight of sound and reflection of color maps the poet's means of locating a place, a way of knowing it through text, and a means of constructing an ecotone in language.

Part of Niedecker's poetics and epistemology, an emphasis on the language used to portray a considered interaction with an object, stems from her affiliations with Objectivist practice, which Charles Altieri asserts aims to compose a "distinct perceptual field" by "presenting the modality of things seen or felt as immediate structure of relations" (Altieri 26). He also notes that Objectivist writing is "committed to composition rather than to interpretation" (33), a component of Niedecker's ecopoetry that directs her focus toward precise language of observation and perception. The poem "Smile / to see the lake / lay / the still sky // And / out for an easy / make / the dragonfly" demonstrates in vocabulary of flirtation and sexuality the connection between the lake environment, set against a still sky, and an element within that environment, the promiscuous dragonfly. This piece provides the conditions for a reflective poetics that
approaches the act of locating in text through language to achieve a specific engagement with an object, place, or region. Niedecker's reflective poetics in turn provide the conditions for poetry of interrelation, and her contribution to ecopoetry lies in the succinct manner she portrays particulars in relation to one another.

Traces of Haiku

One way to conceive of Niedecker's reflective compositions is to think of each poem as a "trace" of the living thing that it interacts with and demonstrates. In ecocritical terms, poems from "Traces of Living Things" could be thought of as field tracks, bone trails, feather patterns, seeds, flood marks, slug slime, spider webs, scat, or fog at windows that retain the characteristics of a moment in the life of an organism. The green and yellow of the text of the prothonotary warbler renders one instant in the perception of the bird's song. Niedecker's poetics of this late period specifically demonstrate an interest in and affinity with the tradition of the Japanese haiku, a form that enables a poetics of "Traces" of concise moments of perception "grounded in actual time and place" (Gilcrest Ecopoetry 24). In a letter to Charles Reznikoff on November 23, 1959, Niedecker writes "I often feel a kinship between us in the short poem. And if you are my brother-in-poetry then we have Chinese and Japanese brothers. But I have a great deal of practicing to do – of quiet insight – before I can enter such a good family" (letter). To Cid Corman on February 18, 1962, she states: "I've had nothing affect me quite so much since I discovered haiku" (33). Writing of Keith Owen's work to Ronald Ellis Nov.30, 1966, she notes "Japanese influence, of course. Ever felt it? I am perhaps ending with that influence. Perhaps everyone should begin with it" (WP 96).
Her own experimentation with haiku-influenced lines began in the late 1950's with the development of a five-line stanza with rhyming third and fourth lines. She writes to Zukofsky: "did I create a new form . . . influence of haiku I suppose" (Penberthy Corr. 230). Jenny Penberthy notes that these five-line poems first occur during the "FOR PAUL" project (Collected 418), and five were published in Neon 4 (1959) under the title "IN EXCHANGE FOR HAIKU.17" One of these untitled poems,

Fog-thick morning—
I see only
where I now walk. I carry
my clarity
with me (181)

demonstrates the immediacy and introspective characteristics of a haiku poem as the fog provides the conditions for the speaker to participate fully in the present moment of where she "now" walks. With the reduction of vision as a viable means of perceiving the environment, other senses such as sound, smell, or the rhythm of walking and contact with the ground create the "clarity" with which the speaker navigates and experiences the terrain. With precise, spare lines, Niedecker portrays attentiveness to this specific, fog-laden, landscape. Although few of the poems in "Traces" employs the specific five-line form Niedecker developed in response to haiku methods, the mainly three and four-line stanzas reflect the objects, events, and relationships depicted in the poems with precision, spareness, and clarity. Poems such as the thirteen-word "Mergansers / fans / on their heads // Thoughts on things / fold unfold / above the river beds" (Collected 246) locate the specific movement of the ducks' head feathers in a kind of contemplation while swimming along the river that the reader of the poem can then participate in. This

44
allows the reader to experience and perceive the folding and unfolding of the precise moment in a "fog-thick morning" where clarity surfaces.

For Niedecker, haiku serves as a model for incorporating and relating varied observations on a backdrop of silence and empty space. While composing "Lake Superior" she was familiar with Basho's *Oku-No-Hosomichi*, or *Back Roads to Far Towns* a text that combines prose travel-writing with haiku to detail a journey around the north highlands and western coast of Japan in 1689 (Basho 7). Poet, translator, and Zen practitioner Sam Hamhill comments on this work by writing, "Basho, dreaming of the full moon as it rises over boats at Shiogama Beach, is not looking outside himself; rather he is seeking that which is most clearly meaningful within, and locating the 'meaning' within the context of juxtaposed images, images which are interpenetrating and interdependent" (Hamhill 198). The starkness or simplicity of haiku, through introspection, juxtaposition, and words of location, is capable of communicating interrelation. Niedecker's work resonates with such a practice and aesthetic. To Cid Corman she writes of Basho's poems (in Corman's translation) that she thinks "this is it – the ultimate in poetry. The hard and clear with the mystery of poetry – and it's done largely by the words omitted. Stark, isolated words which must somehow connect with each other and into the next line and the sense out of the sound" (Faranda 145). In a five-line poem from "Traces" Niedecker writes, "We are what the seas / have made us // longingly immense // the very veery / on the fence" (*Collected* 240). With the communal and definitive words "we are" the speaker here recalls the "Lake Superior" precept that all life is connected, acknowledges the evolutionary history which precedes human life, and connects a human experience of longing with an expansive sea. The final two lines
locate the "we are" close to home, within the speckled-breasted woodland thrush "on the fence" and demonstrate a small ecotone of reflective engagement between a text and a natural subject.

---

1 In a letter to Cid Corman on October 13, 1967, she writes "I'm mailing you today another envelope of poems that I think of as Part II of a long poem" (Faranda 131).

2 Glissant uses the term "interdependencies" as a structural pattern of Relation as it communicates a non-heirarchical, multiple, and changing relationship between parts in a whole.

3 This version was published in *Origin* 3.9 (April 1968).

4 Niedecker's attention to the importance of being among forests recalls poet Haydn Carruth's assertion that "One cannot act well or beneficially in a place until one has understood its nature, precedent to human intrusion. Thus, in a country originally forested, the farmer must study the forest, because, to be healthy, the field must be an analogue of the forest; in analogy its nature is remembered" (332). In textual analogy, landscapes may be remembered as well; Niedecker engages in such patterning and structuring of verse based on the lay of landscapes.

5 Rukeyser continues: "The work that a poem does is a transfer of human energy, and I think human energy may be defined as consciousness, the capacity to make change in existing conditions" (Rukeyser ii). It is interesting to note the parallels between her discussion of the poem transferring energy and Olson's statements that the poem "is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader" in "Projective Verse" (*Collected Prose* 240).

6 J. Scott Bryson, editor of *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002), arranges poets in the volume according to "Forerunners" (including Emerson, Yeats, Jeffers, and Williams), "Contemporary Ecopoets" (including Ammons, Berry, Merwin, Snyder, Mary Oliver, and Linda Hogan), and poets "Expanding the Boundaries" (including Arthur Sze, Daphne Marlatt, Derek Walcott, Louise Gluck, and Margaret Atwood).

7 Writing of Bly's 1980 anthology *News of the Universe*, which included such poets as Bly, Berry, Snyder, Levertov, Duncan, and McClure, Quetchenbach notes that: "According to Bly, what these poets have in common is their willingness to 'grant consciousness' to 'trees or hills or living creatures not of their own species,' " and to consider other parts of the physical creation as significant not only as objects of study (2). Niedecker does not speak "for" nature in her work, or overtly proclaim environmentalist discourse; her ecopoetics is employs nature as a subject to interact with through experiments with language.

8 In her article "Recharging the Canon: Some Reflections on Feminist Poetics and the Avant-Garde," Marjorie Perloff argues that "For the male Establishment, [Niedecker's] work appears to be a footnote to an already marginalized, 'difficult' poetic movement" (16).

9 Studies remain to be done on Niedecker's ecopoetic body of work with respect to, for example, the plants and birds named throughout her work that vocalize specific tones and colors, the refrains of agrarian and daily rural rhythms in her folk poetry, the interplay between an eastern holiday landscape and a Wisconsin locale in the "For Paul" sequences, or the precision of perception of a natural disaster such as in these lines written in 1962: "River-marsh-drowse / and in flood / moonlight / gives sight / of no land" (*Collected* 195). The research that contributes to the writing of poems in *North Central* (1968) as well as poems such as the series "Thomas Jefferson," "His Carpets Flowered" (for William Morris), and "Darwin" results in longer sequences that interact with the particular environments of each respective region or character, while still retaining the sharp perceptions and spare observations characteristic of the poet's work.


11 In a letter to *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe on February 12, 1934 she writes: "It means that for me at least, certain words of a sentence, - prepositions, connectives, pronouns - belong up toward full consciousness, while strange and unused words appear only in subconscious" (*WP* 182).

12 Consideration of her early practice provides insights into her 1960's projects, which are also informed by ecopoetic attention to silence, pause, and Asian forms of writing as I will discuss following this section.

Gilcrest also argues that Western ideologies, and such philosophers as Plato and Augustine, can also provide examples of a contemplative tradition. He writes that "Augustine's meditative epistemology is invoked in the rhetoric of introspection, contemplation in the realm of silence" (25), and can serve as a model for ecopoets.

Evidence of her reading surfaces in some of her poems in direct address, allusion, or discussion of Asian contemplative writers. Poems such as "Basho / beholds the moon / in the water // He is full // at the port / of Tsuruga" (*Collected* 270) and "Sky / in my favor // to fly / to downtown crowds / home // and Basho / on my mind" infuse Niedecker's considered observations of nature such as in the lines: "You see here / the influence / of inference // Moon on rippled / stream" (228).

She further explains that "Poems are for one person to another, spoken thus, or read silently" (Faranda 121).


This text was translated by Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu and published 1968, with excerpts first published in *Origin* 2.14 (July 1964).
"The Ridge of Her Investigation": Niedecker's Conservationist Poetics

"Wintergreen Ridge," the final poem of North Central, takes as its title subject the 1,001-acre area of wooded bogs, sandy ridges, and marshy areas of the Ridges Sanctuary near Bailey's Harbor on Lake Michigan in Door County, northern Wisconsin. Niedecker traveled with husband Al Millen in August or September 1967 to the Door County region, described in a letter to Cid Corman as "that thumb-peninsula out into L. Michigan—limestone, autumn leaves, fishing villages" (130). The long poem grew rapidly out of this excursion; on October 13, 1967, she writes that the third section of North Central is "coming up (since Door Co. trip) but no telling when it'll be finished" (132) and by December 7, 1967 she notes to Corman that she sent "Wintergreen Ridge" to Clayton Eshleman for Caterpillar, remarking that it "really is . . . the best thing [she's] ever done" (136). "Wintergreen Ridge" revises the fragmentation and breaks of "Lake Superior" and the haiku-infused short poems in "Traces of Living Things" into the form of ninety-four triplet stanzas yoked by a consistent narrative tone. The linguistic inventiveness and verbal play characteristic of Niedecker occurs within this formal schema or system, reflecting the dynamics of the Ridges Sanctuary ecosystem in its spatially limited but vibrant locale. As the speaker of the poem constructs a walk through the ridge area, details the history and botany of the region, and situates the "Ridge" of wild plants in a social context that includes the threat of atomic warfare, she advocates, through celebration of natural processes, for protection of the sand, marsh, and soil out of which the plants and flowers of the poem grow. The ecotone where the Ridges Sanctuary interacts with Niedecker's composition is grounded in the origins of the conservation of the preserve.
In "Wintergreen Ridge" Niedecker engages in conservationist composition, a poetics that investigates and endorses protection of a specific landscape through portrayal of interdependent processes, biodiversity, and human participation in the Ridges environmental systems. This chapter details the components of Niedecker's conservationist poetics, employed in "Wintergreen Ridge" to subvert the masculinist and canonical "nature walk" trope, demonstrate women's participation in conservation work, and assert the capabilities of poetry to mediate relationships between nature and those who perceive society as a separate entity. This analysis ends in the suggestion of further analysis by discussing Niedecker's poem in relation to William Carlos Williams' "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." The ecotone in which the "Wintergreen Ridge" text meets the Ridges Sanctuary reflects the environmental activism that established the preserve, the ecological epistemology\(^3\) that sustains its protection, and interaction by observation and human alignment with the life cycles of individual wildflowers and plants. "Wintergreen Ridge" advocates for land conservation through rendering the landscape in words and practicing a poetics of conservation of language.

The landscape of the Ridges Sanctuary provides a ripe context for an ecopoet to investigate and demonstrate interrelation, evolutionary principles, and plant succession. Wintergreen Ridge is only one of about thirty crescent-shaped ridges in the Sanctuary that have formed parallel to the shore of Bailey's Harbour, the curved bay that borders the park. Formation of the area began 1,200 years ago when sand deposited during the last glacial advance in Wisconsin was carried by Lake Michigan currents into the bay on the southern piece of the Door Peninsula. Natural cycles of high and low water levels of the lake begin the creation of the ridges; high tidal waves push sand into a low ridge along
the shoreline. As lake levels drop, this newly formed ridge is exposed and rapidly
stabilized by plants such as sedges and grasses. Small shrubs and trees follow, and begin
to provide shelter for other plant communities. Since it takes about thirty to forty years
for each ridge to form, ridges closest to the shoreline are youngest in terms of the plants
found there, and older plant communities are found on each succeeding ridge to the north
of the bay. Nearly 500 vascular plants, including twelve endangered or threatened
species and over 25 native orchids, are found in the unique Sanctuary (Ridges). Writing
of her first visit to the bioregion, nature and travel-book author Virginia Eifert notes that
she "turned a page in a living book of ecology" (30). Niedecker's experience and textual
rendition of Wintergreen Ridge depicts such a page in a "living book" of boreal forest,
 bogs, and wildflowers.

*Conservation of Land and Language*

Conservation denotes preservation or restoration of a natural environment and its
wildlife, as well as preservation and repair of archaeological, historical, and cultural sites
and artifacts, and the careful use of resources (Oxford 303). Ecological conservation can
involve preserving habitats for wild plants and animals, restoring landscapes that have
been damaged through deforestation or mining, or managing resources to minimize
human damage to an environment by hunting, fishing, or recreational land use.

Contemporary conservation practices, such as the State of Alaska's Fish and Game
policies that monitor and regulate wild salmon migration levels as fish enter spawning
channels, also pay attention to environmental factors, predators, or prey which might
influence or be influenced by decisions to limit or increase salmon fishing. Often
conservation involves not simply "saving" a species in isolation, although sometimes this practice occurs, for example, when biologists are trying to encourage breeding in a rare species such as spotted owl, but determining and protecting the relationships between elements and species so that an environment might self-perpetuate, as in the protection of a watershed. Foundational conservationist tracts such as George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864) and Wisconsin resident Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1949) advocate for simultaneous farming, hunting, land use and preservation practices according to natural limits and attention to human effects on wildlife and wild plants. Leopold's campaigns for conservation through federal wilderness preserves and by individuals on private lands have been widely influential and appreciated for their environmental logic and knowledge of the habits of specific species; in the short piece "Woodlot Wildlife" he writes that in Wisconsin, citizens must pay a hunting license to restock the state with raccoons, while at the same time hollow trees where raccoons live are being chopped down. "A few hollow trees," he suggests, "especially durable live basswoods or oaks, and a few dead and down logs are essential to a balanced assortment of wildlife . . ." (Leopold 89). The WPA *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State* (1944) that Niedecker worked on echoes Leopold's warnings about species loss and management by noting how the effects of exploitation are becoming more widely understood as "soil has been exhausted or eroded, water levels have shifted, and wildlife and natural beauty have departed with the timber" (20). These observations paved the way for the founding of the Wisconsin Wildlife Foundation in 1935, whose recognition of the "delicate system of balances by which one natural resource sustains
another" began to influence ideas of conservation in Wisconsin that led to resource management and the preservation of lands such as the Ridges Sanctuary (20).

Niedecker's "Wintergreen Ridge" combines linguistic and poetic conservation with a "downright ecological consciousness" (Caddel 120) that informs and frames the ideas of conservation of wild land present in the poem. If a goal of conservation is to work toward the furtherance of natural processes, a goal of conservationist composition is to portray interdependent organisms, create biodiverse conditions within one's own work, and convey understanding or create understanding as to why natural systems should remain intact. Her poem advocates for preservation and interaction with wild spaces, or places that humans participate in without destroying natural balances. By Niedecker's conservation of language I refer in part to the oft-quoted "condensery" and brevity of line in her work as it involves translating and preserving elements of a landscape in language by foregrounding their inter-connections. Conservation of language also involves the daily upkeep and care that a museum conservationist gives to an object by removing layers, dusting, repainting, or attending to the re-creation of the object with the aim of maintaining and restoring its condition. The poet's conservationist aesthetic, as defined in this chapter, recognizes the importance of biodiversity and depicts it through naming specific systems, such as a bee pollinating a Lady Slipper, and by employing multiple kinds of discourse to reflect biodiversity linguistically. Niedecker's conservation of language also relates environmental and human factors and demonstrates physical and emotional experiences that metaphorically mirror actions of plants on the Ridge. By placing natural objects, or grouping species types, in "Wintergreen Ridge" in close proximity and relation to one another (by juxtaposing species that are related by genus or
flowering season, or by aligning disparate elements to establish relation), Niedecker establishes the parameters of the ecosystem of the Ridge and defends its preservation.

"Wintergreen Ridge" is in some ways a departure from Niedecker's other politically-inclined work, though it still adheres to Zukofsky's idea that "poetry convinces not by dogma but by the form it creates to carry its content" (A Test 52). Without making didactic statements, in several places the poem clearly celebrates and advocates for ecologically conservationist practices, quoting from an unidentified source, for example, "'Every creature // better alive / than dead, / men and moose // and pine trees'" (Collected 248). This position is strengthened, however, by the "objective" presentation of multiple elements that make up "Wintergreen Ridge" and its ecological and social context in ways that portray an interrelated system. Richard Caddel notes that Niedecker's "mild rebuke" in "Lake Superior" to "ecological aggressors" who destroyed the wild pigeon "is as much a cultural signature of the objectivists as any other element, in the same way that the stress laid on the 'minor units of sincerity' is a technical signature" (Caddel 121). He argues that the poet's "formal insistence on cohesion, concision, and understatement is in full accordance with the unities she wishes to assert" suggests that Objectivists "share a common reticence—an unwillingness to degrade language (and thus people using language) by rhetoric or dogma" (Caddel 121). Some of Niedecker's folk poetry, for example, critiques Depression-era politics that perpetuate poverty and popular consumerism, but achieves its messages through portrayal of particulars like a worn dress, and through minimizing the lyric ego figure that operates strongly in some overtly political poetry in favor of collective and anonymous voices. Elizabeth Willis connects the non-dogmatic "celebration and critique" present in Niedecker's folk poetry to Charles
Reznikoff's work. She notes that the "objective' presentation" of "Testimony," his long poem of American violence, opens the way for a "motive as well as emotive – empathetic and political – response" (Willis 99). Of Niedecker's North Central poems, "Wintergreen Ridge" most clearly presents an ideological, conservationist, argument that may generate responses toward further conservation in its readers through both its detailed "objective" presentation and its more overt advocacy.

Niedecker's support for public preservation of wildflowers also recalls one of the opening lines in her "Darwin" poem, where she states "Species are not / (it is like confessing / a murder) immutable" (295). Jeffrey Peterson notes that "Niedecker seem[s] originally to have been drawn to Objectivism for its 'science,'" (citing a letter to Zukofsky of 1947) and this statement may be a way to reconcile the political understatement of most of Niedecker's career with the more enthusiastic and overt conservationist stance she takes in "Wintergreen Ridge" (WP 256). Zukofsky establishes a relationship between science and poetic form in his introduction to the 1933 issue of Poetry. Niedecker communicates the operation of evolutionary process in "Darwin" in which she writes "Darwin // sailed out / of Good Success Bay / to carcass- / conclusions— // the universe / not built by brute force / but designed by laws / The details left // to the working of chance" (299). Niedecker approaches the bioregion of the Ridges with a Darwinian understanding of laws and systems that govern natural processes, and with respect for and interest in its intricacies and dynamics. Her reports about the origins of the Ridges Sanctuary and her encouragement for such conservation efforts are substantiated by a clear interest in specific natural processes of individual species along the ridge walk.
Ridge Walk as Conservationist Advocacy and Feminist Analysis

The "thumb-peninsula" Niedecker describes in the letter to Corman accurately portrays the area from an aerial view or a map, but the poem details interactions with the actual Ridges ground. "Wintergreen Ridge" begins by locating the reader "where the arrows / of the road signs / lead us:;" the diction and the colon evoking the journeying toward and entrance into (identified by the colon) a discussion of the relations between evolution, geological formation, and art in the first section of the poem. This opening section sets up the ecotone that generates the relations between land and art, grounded in evolution and natural change that the speaker wants to preserve. What lies beyond the arrows to the Ridges Sanctuary in the poem is a Darwinian statement that what is natural in life is the evolution of matter. "Nothing supra-rock" about it, the speaker insists, but simply "butterflies / are quicker / than rock," (Collected 247) grounding the process of evolution in geological origination emphasized in "Lake Superior" and outlining in a few quick strokes ideas of relation of species and elements in Darwin's language of "survival of the fittest." Niedecker begins "Wintergreen Ridge" with an echo of "Lake Superior's" opening "In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock" (Collected 232) to emphasize rock's intrinsic participation in the life cycles and evolution of the Door County region as in all locations. "Man / lives hard / on this stone perch," she continues, "by sea imagines durable works // in creation here / as in the center / of the world // let's say / of art," connecting the process by which humans create lasting works and art with the process by which molten rock produces solid or "durable" rock. "Wintergreen Ridge" departs from a discussion of the geological structure of all things after this initial acknowledgement, focusing instead on the creative processes of plant life.
The lines "Let's say / of art" are also grammatically connected to, and share a
three-line stanza with, the words "We climb"; the initiation of the speaker's walk up the
limestone cliffs of Lake Michigan on the edge of the Ridges Sanctuary is thereby
connected to the work of art, and invokes a Parnassus-like creative goal. In this
introductory walk sequence, and throughout the poem, she subverts the masculinist and
objectifying implications of the "nature walk" trope as found in some Romantic poetry
and American frontier literature by delineating women's conservationist activity in
preserving the Ridges Sanctuary, and by focusing on active plant processes that challenge
stereotypically feminine portrayals of flowers. In his introduction to the inaugural issue
of Ecopoetics, Jonathan Skinner suggests that we might begin to revalue the "nature
walk" with "radically different senses of 'nature' and 'history' from those with which the
Victorian era charged this discipline," and characterizes nineteenth-century "transparent
narratives of self-discovery, or solipsistic, self-expressive displays" as ill-suited to current
environmental crises (6). Niedecker's response to her walk through Wintergreen Ridge
reflects an attention to natural processes and the role of women in preserving the wild
space revises the Victorian categories of "nature" and "history" Skinner invokes. The
speaker of the poem's out-of-style skirt implies a saving or conservation of materials, and
aligns the speaker with the conservationist idea quoted from an anonymous speaker:
"'Every creature / better alive / than dead" (248). This becomes the central precept of the
poem, which forwards the theme of interconnected systems present in "Lake Superior"
and "Traces of Living Things," and uses the idea to advocate for conservation of
resources and preservation of wild things.
Readers enter the geographical space of Wintergreen Ridge as the speaker of the poem announces "Wait! What's this?— / sign: // Flowers / loveliest / where they grow // Love then enjoy them / and leave them so / Let's go!" (Collected 249). The "sign," both wooden post and linguistic marker, delivers the message and the speaker of the poem reacts with enthusiasm. "Evolution's wild ones / saved," the speaker remarks, by "Women / of good wild stock" who "stood stolid / before machines / ... stopped bulldozers / cold," saying, "[w]e want it for all time" (Collected 249). By aligning the "wild ones" of the Ridges Sanctuary with the women of "good wild stock," Niedecker establishes a relationship between the flora and the women that subverts the often objectified position both floral landscapes and females are given in some canonical pastoral writing. Niedecker avoids feminizing flowers through her depiction of wild plants with exactness, aggressive characteristics, matter-of-fact delineations of processes such as the sphagnum moss "engulf[ing]" a fly. She avoids essentializing women by depicting them as "stolid," endowing them with traits such as calmness, dependability, and showing little emotion or animation (Oxford 1413). This description contradicts sentimental or objectifying portrayals of women in relation to nature and sentimental understandings of women in activist work initiated by nineteenth-century philanthropic roles so reliant on ideology of separate gender spheres. Niedecker in this section employs the biography of the conservationist women to depict a feminist engagement with wild landscape and insert women into a Wisconsin history of conservation that includes Aldo Leopold and plant ecologist John T. Curtis. In doing so she also subverts the traditional anthropocentric and objectifying "nature walk" as agency in the poem belongs both to the stolid women and to the plants, who first "saved" themselves through
a long evolutionary process the poem draws attention to by calling the flowers
"evolution's wild ones" (Collected 249).

On the walk through the "flowering ridge / the second one back / from the
lighthouse" the speaker recites common and species names of flora and details specific
processes of reproduction, digestion, and death. The ridge bioregion here drives the text,
meets the text as the speaker walks and records information. The club mosses and
horsetails that "stayed alive" after dinosaurs became extinct are grouped in an ecotone
with the "laurel in muskeg," "Andromeda," (also called "Bog Rosemary") and "Cisandra
of the bog," the stanza group reflecting the land space of these plants which can all be
found in bogs or stream banks. Niedecker establishes relationships between plants by
placing their names in proximity to one another. Other types of interrelation come from
juxtaposing plants; in "The Ecology of Poetry," Marcella Durand asserts that
"association, juxtaposition, metaphor are how the poet can go further than the scientist in
addressing systems . . . in a way that is concentrated, that alters perception, that
permanently alters language or a linguistic structure" (62). In Niedecker's construction,
the "Pearl-flowered / Lady's tresses" share a stanza with the "insect-eating / pitcher
plant," in a balance of the picturesque and the carnivorous that creates a dynamic in
which the Lady's tresses may possess teeth and the pitcher plant beauty. Niedecker
challenges ideas of benign, feminized, or passively pretty flowers with images of active,
aggressive, and "wild" flora, delineating a landscape that Peterson argues "debunks" the
received notion of a "beneficent natural world superficially construed as 'feminine'" (WP
253). Invocation of the pitcher plant leads to seven stanzas articulating the process by
which "Bedeviled little Drosera / of the sundews" captures and digests flies. The sundew
(Droseraceae) family, of which Venus's Flytrap is a member, is made up of carnivorous herbs with a habitat of damp boggy soil, whose sticky-hairy leaves exude drops of clear fluid in which insects are trapped (Linn 262). "Drosera rotundifolia," a low perennial with a base of round, spreading leaves ¼ to ¾ inches across and a tall slender scape with small white ½ inch flowers at the top (Linn 75), performs its act in the poem as it "sticks out its sticky . . . tentacled leaf" and engulfs a fly a half an inch away. That the octopus-like leaf here captures a fly almost as far away as the leaf is long is certainly a threatening act! Niedecker elaborates on this process by explaining "[j]ust the touch / of a gnat on a filament // stimulates leaf-plasma / secretes a sticky / clear liquid" (cite). Tactile descriptions of the work of glands on the leaves, and repetition of the word "sticky" reinforces the portrayal of entrapping substances that enable digestion of prey.

Communicating the biodiversity and particular processes of plants on the Ridge provides an opportunity for Niedecker to challenge feminized constructions of landscapes that often lead to exploitation of resources.

In an instance of recurrence (in which a repeated phrase in a poem shifts to establish new kinships and encompass new meanings within a new context), just after the delineation of digestive and reproductive plant processes, the speaker asserts: "Women saved / a pretty thing: truth" (Collected 252). The word "saved" recalls that early in the poem we learn of "[e]volution's wild ones / saved" by "continuous life / through change" and the natural laws and chance details on which selection and survival depend. Then we hear that the locale of the poem was originally protected by women "of good wild stock" who "saved" it (Collected 249). In the third invocation of conservation, the land which "women saved" is described as "a pretty thing: truth." This phrase occurs on one line,
suggesting that it should be read continuously, without a semantic break after "pretty
thing." The starkness of the word "truth" immediately undercuts the word "pretty,"
which denotes a delicate attractiveness and connotes a feminized characterization of wild
plants. Niedecker argues here that women physically saved the land and bogs on which
the small ridge ecosystem thrives, self-selects, and engages with bug-life and other ridge
life. They also saved the conditions in which one can experience the harshness,
interdependence, and vibrancy of natural processes. The poem aligns itself with such a
conservationist project by articulating the particularities of these plant and flowers and
how they relate to one another. Establishing the terms and economies of Wintergreen
Ridge can be a way to incite, in Elizabeth Willis' words, an emotive and political
response toward further conservation in the reader.

Components of Conservationist Poetics: Biodiversity in Language and Human
Participation in Ridges Bioregion

Niedecker engages multiple discourses, including Linnean organization, folk talk, literary
allusion, and metaphoric registers, as she discusses plant life to align the poem with the
multiplicity of organisms on Wintergreen Ridge, a key component of conservationist
composition. Her facility with botanic discourse allows her to consider and incorporate a
space of inter-relation between investigations of poetry and science. Rukeyser proposes
"a meeting-place between all kinds of the imagination" (ii) and Niedecker's lexicon in
"Wintergreen Ridge" demonstrates such an aesthetic. Inter-play between Linnaean
species names and common names of plants blends the official and singular with the
familiar and multiple, as many plants have numerous common names that shift
regionally. This linguistic interrogation of bioregion and popular region reflects
Niedecker's interest in folk cultures; work on the *WPA Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State* contributed to her "folk" project, but throughout this early period attentiveness to the natural rhythms of floods and seasons pervades her poems. After detailing the specific digestion practices of the insect-eating Drosera, the speaker of "Wintergreen Ridge" shifts registers to remark "the better to eat you / my dear," a playful reference to the human-eating wolf in the folk tale "Little Red Riding Hood;" the section continues with an assertion that the Drosera plant or the wolf "digest[s] cartilage // and tooth enamel" and a literary reference to D.H. Lawrence's observation of "blood / in a green growing thing" (*Collected* 251). Niedecker treats plant reproduction with colloquial sexual terms like "[t]hey do it with glue" and a brief narrative of an affair between a Lady's slipper orchid and a befuddled bee who must "go out the rear / the load on him / for the next / flower" (*Collected* 251). These multiple means of engaging with plant processes and characteristics enriches the poem and constructs a lively ridge of wildflowers that intersect with one another, with insects, and with multiple types of language systems.

Niedecker's inclusion of multiple discourses and lexicons in the composition of "Wintergreen Ridge" reflects an attention to the biodiversity of the Sanctuary. Demonstrating diversity in codes of language is a way of articulating the diversity of plant life that she also attends to in naming multiple species throughout the poem. Burton Hatlen discusses an emphasis in Objectivist writing on materiality but notes that Objectivist writings "are generally less concerned with the thing seen than with the way we see" (*Nexus* 49). Niedecker certainly writes in concert with Hatlen's analysis as she consistently employs tools such as disjunctive syntax, extended modifiers, and mixed
registers of language to produce effects that challenge habitual thought processes of the reader.

As the poem shifts from the introductory discussion of women's role in the saving of the Ridge and some of the plant processes within it to the poem's first "I" phrase, it begins to examine relationships of humans and plants. "'We have a lovely / finite parentage / mineral / vegetable / animal" (Collected 252) the speaker quotes, invoking human origin in more than the rock of "Lake Superior" but within a tripartite schema of evolution that speaks to human participation in the same ecological system that supports the growth of wildflowers on the Ridge. The landscape of Wintergreen Ridge provides the sounds, sights, and cycles that Niedecker uses to locate humans as participants in the ecosystem. The Ridges Sanctuary constitutes a unique environment, with particular species, which constitutes a different template for Niedecker's equations of human emotion than, say, Arctic tundra or Paraguayan grasslands. The "I" of "I suddenly heard / the cry / my mother's" in the nearby dark wood begins a sequence in which the speaker locates herself and human sadness and grief within the deciduous de-leafing process of autumn. The cry comes from the wood "where the light / pissed past / the pistillate cone" (252). Without relying on biography, it may be applicable to note that the poet's mother was nearly deaf most of Niedecker's life, and died in July of 1951 (Penberthy Corr. 181). When the sound comes from the dark trees during the poet's walk through the Ridges Sanctuary, it comes from the place where light discharges or releases its waves past the female-gendered "pistillate cone" or fruit of conifer needle-leaved evergreen trees such as pine (Gurevitch 375). Sound comes from the place where light passes by the cone, and Niedecker translates this sound into memory. The mother's cry
and the construction of her in the past tense equate her with the flower she loved: "closed gentians / she herself // so closed" (252). The terms of the landscape proscribe the terms with which Niedecker portrays human presence within it.

Through metaphorical alignment of processes of leaving and grieving, Niedecker locates humans in Wintergreen Ridge and further establishes the ecotone between the text and bioregion in the interactions of the speaker among the trees and flowers. Following the memory of her mother, she writes of a friend whose pen stabbed both "close to the heart" and "pieced the woods / red (autumn)" (Collected 253). Seasonal change as representative of human emotion is an oft-used poetic convention; Niedecker identifies the specific substance that is discarded by the trees dumping their leaves "when they've no need // of an overload / of cellulose / for a cool while" (Collected 253). This attempt to locate the process of loss within dropping of unnecessary sugars metaphorically positions human experience as participating in an ecosystem rather than in a position of mastery over nature. Metaphorical connections with plants are one way that the poet can construct humans as operating in relationship with nature, and align plant processes and human experience that may foster ecological and conservationist ideas in the reader. Conservation, in the poem's estimation, is not meant to protect natural elements from their natural life and death cycles or natural selection, but to protect the conditions in which these processes might occur without great influence or resource depletion by humans.
Conservationist Composition: Translation of Environment to Text

The grief of the pistillate and pen passage resolves in the statement: "Nobody, nothing / ever gave me / greater thing // than time / unless light / and silence / which if intense / makes sound" (Collected 253). Following the identification of the trees' process of losing leaves for a "cool while," the eight lines demonstrate a returning to a solitary part of a seasonal cycle with time for the daily practice of living, light for outward sight, and silence for reflection which "if intense" produces a kind of whirring concentration, or utterance, voice, and song. "Wintergreen Ridge" offers a formula for conservationist composition: demonstrating a realization of need to conserve, asking about the region one participates in and cultivating knowledge about that bioregion, and then writing of the systems of that region, its components, and edges in multiple types of language registers. After steeping in the information sources of the Ridge system, time, light, and silence provide the conditions for reflective writing.

Reminding us of the fragility and inevitable transformation, through death, of all life, the speaker observes silently destructive lichen "grind[ing] with their acid / granite to sand" (253). Juxtaposing the erosive work of lichen, that may survive the annihilation threatened by "the grand blow-up" of an atomic bomb, with the implied extinction that such a bomb could cause contrasts the scale of naturally destructive processes and human-powered ones. This advocacy for conservation of natural systems is made clearer by the speaker's realization that she has forgotten to ask a visiting poet from Newcastle on Tyne (Basil Bunting) "what wild plants" grow where he's from. The importance placed on this question suggests that the wild plants of one's home should be considered a part of one's identity and ancestry, as common to conversation among friends as how
one's family is, what foods one most enjoys, or what losses one has recently experienced. Preserving wild plants, in wilderness, in conversation, and in text is the poet's active response to the threat of nuclear destruction.

The text of the Wintergreen Ridge walk, interwoven with tangential associations and memories such as the Bunting's visit, also demonstrates the poetic process of sensing / perceiving and naming / writing the plants and flowers the poet encounters. An encore of flora—gaywings, bishop's cup, and white bunchberry—record the common names of a plants bearing whorls and racemes of white flowers under the poem's aspens. A grouping of "pisissewa / (wintergreen) / grass of parnassus" comprises a set of low flowering plants aligned both for their linguistic and metaphorical suggestion and proximity to one another. Pississewa (Chimaphila umbellata of the Pyrola family) and wintergreen (Gaultheria procumbens of the Pyrola family) are usually found in sandy dry woods and the grass of Parnassus (Parnassia glauca of the Saxifrage family) in damp meadows (Linn 49;53;62); the bioregion of Ridges, with sandy ridges alongside meadow-like dips provides such proximate conditions. The stanza lists the plants in this order to demonstrate interrelation and call attention to the multiplicity and ambiguity of plant names. Pississewa resembles and is often called "wintergreen," and the parenthetical "wintergreen" could refer to the common name for pipsissewa or Gaultheria procumbens as the poem's title and location\(^{15}\) suggests. "(Wintergreen)" also could modify the "grass of parnassus," suggesting that wintergreen or this flowering ridge is the Parnassus to which the poem aspires and attempts to depict. By locating Parnassus also in the grass of Parnassus, the first species to grow on new ridges of the bioregion, she further suggests that poetry is found in and among the lowest growing places. The Ridge landscape,
comprised of various relationships among plants and shifting relations among their names, enables Niedecker's translation of the area into a language system and stanza of ambiguous and multiple alignments.

From the "grass of Parnassus" the speaker instructs us to "See beyond— / ferns / algae / water lilies // Scent / the simple / the perfect / order / of that flower / water lily" (Collected 254). Scent is a quintessential characteristic of flora and a primary means by which they reproduce naturally, attracting bees for pollination. Niedecker "orders" the sensing and perceptions in the poem, composing along musical phrases toward "perfect" particulars. By repeating "water lily" after the phrase "water lilies // Scent / the simple / the perfect // order / of that flower / water lily" Niedecker demonstrates the awareness that comes from experiencing an individual flower; the signature scent of the water lily emerges from the plural of the pond once a bystander focuses on fully perceiving it. In directing readers to "see beyond" the visual display of a lily pond and to experience the olfactory, she also asks us to engage other sensory systems as we experience the Ridges environment. By suggesting that we engage with the bioregion through smelling plants, listening for birdcalls or waves, seeing an array of colors, touching rough leaves, or tasting wintergreen berries, the poem proposes that we find our own relationship with, and ways of knowing, the natural species of our particular region. This kind of sensory interaction creates connections between humans and environments, enables the location of individual and unique organisms that stand out from "nature" as a daunting whole, and forwards an ecological and conservationist project. She calls attention here to her conservationist poetics: a method that engages with the part and the whole, that maintains focus on natural elements themselves, and that chooses words carefully to help depict a
means of perceiving a dynamic system of which the water lily, the wintergreen, the women who stood before bulldozers, and the ones who now walk the boardwalks of the Sanctuary, are integral pieces.

As "Wintergreen Ridge" unfolds from its preservation history to its individual organisms to the participation of humans in its life processes, the text continually encourages an ecological epistemology that acknowledges the importance of biodiversity in species and language systems, locates humans in particular interrelated bioregions, and forwards conservation efforts. The poem grows out of the landscape, and the final stanzas locate where the edges of the natural environment brush up against the presence of social institutions, building structures, and bombs. In this wider social context, Niedecker positions objects like a space-rocket, gin, city architecture, and factory smokestacks against the natural and growing environment of the Ridges. She speaks of a "factory-long body // crawled out from a rise / of black dinosaur-necked / blower-beaked // smokestack-steeple" in a horrific conflation of a history of extinction and a phoenix-like rise of polluting industry. The final stanzas of thoughts from the "Ridge" walk reflect an environmental crisis that threatens even the Sanctuary's preservation.

Literal critic Jane Augustine comments that Niedecker's three-line stanza in "Wintergreen Ridge" recalls that of William Carlos Williams' three-line stanza in "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," a lengthy love poem meditating on age and marriage written to his wife Flossie and published in 1951 (281). I'd like to suggest that "Wintergreen Ridge" is in some ways a response to Williams' poem particularly as Niedecker constructs the Ridge in relation to society in her section of environmental
warning. Most interestingly in this context is Niedecker's engagement with Williams' lines about the news. He writes:

    My heart rouses
    thinking to bring you news
    of something
    that concerns you
    and concerns many men. Look at
    what passes for the new.
    You will not find it there but in
    despised poems.
    It is difficult
    to get the news from poems
    yet men die miserably every day
    for lack
    of what is found there. (Williams 150)

Williams' desire to bring his wife news of the falseness of commercial innovation or social trends establishes poetry as the "despised" or unread source of information that might solve or salve human misery. Niedecker acknowledges Williams' assertions, and locates her argument for conservation (that humans are implicated in environmental crises) at a similar distance from poetry or the environment: in reports from newspapers. She notes: "So far out of flowers / human parts found / wrapped in newspaper . . . More news: the war // which 'cannot be stopped' / ragweed pollen / sneezeweed." "No wild bird" mourns the loss of people, such as the men in the news who died or the men who died daily in the Vietnam War that Niedecker protests by equating it to rapidly spreading weeds and weed pollen. And more news: a "second shift steamfitter / ran arms out // as tho to fly / dived to concrete / from loading dock" (257). Literally, as she constructs, men are dying for lack of what is found in poems such as "Wintergreen Ridge." Further, Niedecker's poem suggests what can be found in the media of poems can also be found in
locating oneself within an ecotone or region, and in recognizing and respecting biodiversity.

Whereas the speaker in Williams' poem directs his woman friend to bow to the idea of love with him, Niedecker ends "Wintergreen Ridge" with non-anthropocentric deference. "It rained / mud squash / willow leaves // in the eaves" she writes, depicting an autumn storm in which wind or rain bends a sunflower:

```
Old sunflower
  you bowed

to no one
  but Great Storm
  of Equinox. (257)
```

The sunflower bows in the equinoctial storm in rhythm with the natural cycles of its life and death, not to the destruction of human-driven extinction or bulldozers. The sunflower defers to nature's destructive powers, and in an equation established through long evolutionary processes, the storm of Equinox ensures the spreading of the plant's seeds and the renewal of its flowering form in spring. These lines align the sunflower with the women who didn't bow before the trucks, and therefore with human acts of conservation that preserve the conditions for natural death and regeneration. If "Wintergreen Ridge" contains news, it advocates for preservation of wild land, conservation of resources, human interaction with diverse environments, and recognition of interrelation among species. Her ecotones, or spaces where the wild intersects with her textual investigations, provide models for such considered interaction.
The poem was first published in *Caterpillar* 3 / 4 (April-July 1968): 229-37.

Niedecker's letter of Sept. 13, 1967 continues: "The whole north country, I'm completely absorbed in it, I'm buried and rise again!" (130).

By "ecological epistemology" I refer to an understanding of "nature" as a changing, interdependent system in which all vegetables, minerals, and animals (humans included) participate.

In definition of this term, she states: "In balancing the objective and the sincere, Reznikoff's long poem documents the violence within American culture without reducing it to political message-making. . . . Similarly, Niedecker celebrates the richness of folk language while acknowledging the brutality of the culture it supports" (Willis 99).

The "road signs" also recall Niedecker's description in the Lake Superior "Notes" of road signs whirring by as one drives, and the multiple resonances of "sign" (Notes 1.1, 9.1).

The "road signs" also recall Niedecker's description in the Lake Superior "Notes" of road signs whirring by as one drives, and the multiple resonances of "sign" (Notes 1.1, 9.1).

For further reading on objectification and sentimentalizing of nature in pastoral poetry, see Louise H. Westling's *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* or David Gail's *Female Heroism in the Pastoral*.

For critiques of objectification of women in frontier writing, see Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* and *The Land Before Her*, Robin Norwood and Vera Monk's *The Desert is No Lady*, Peter Wild's *Sentimentalism in the American Southwest: John C. Van Dyke, Mary Austin, and Edward Abbey* in *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West*.

While this paper doesn't propose to detail in full the tradition of pastoral poetry that often objectifies women or employs stereotypical "feminine" metaphors for landscape, an example from Wordsworth's "Evening Walk" may serve to demonstrate the kind of language Niedecker resists in her own rendition of her walk. Wordsworth writes of a group of swans near a tranquil lake:

```
The eye that marks the gliding creature sees
How graceful pride can be, and how majestic, ease.
While tender cares and mild domestic loves,
With furtive watch pursue her as she moves,
The female with a meeker charm succeeds,
And her brown little ones around her leads,
Nibbling the water lilies as they pass,
Or playing wanton with the floating grass.
She, in her mother's care, her beauty's pride
Forgetting, calls the wearied to her side;
Alternately they mount her back, and rest
Close by her mantling wings' embraces prest.
Long may they float upon this flood serene;
Their be these holms untrodden, still, and green,
Where leafy shades fence off the blustering gale,
And breathes in peace the lily of the vale!
Yon isle, which feels not even milkmaid's feet,
Yet hears her song, "by distance made more sweet,"
Yon isle conceals their home, their hut-like bower:
Green water-rushes overspread the floor;
Long grass and willows form the woven wall,
And swings above the roof the poplar tall. (Mahoney 110)
```

Emphasizing the "domestic" qualities of the "peaceful vale" reinforces stereotypical roles of women and projects these attributes onto the swan in its "hut-like bower." This type of writing exhibits masterful meter and revolutionary attention to the rhythms and tones of speech attuned to a natural environment, but does not engage with real processes of nature and the (non-gendered) particularities of an ecosystem. Donna Landry asserts that "however much the activity of walking might have meant to Wordsworth as a political gesture or a source of pleasure or social bonding, the walking was always subordinated to the writing" and explains that the poet's walking for composition most often took place in a "sheltered and confined space" (Landry 214—216) that would not generate the same engagement with an ecosystem that Niedecker's walk through Ridges promotes.

Niedecker's most successful methods.

tentacles—the fact that a plant should secrete an acid acutely akin to the digestive fluid of an

residents, both men and women, formed a group which was responsible for preserving the area eventually known as The Ridges Sanctuary, Inc" (Paul).

In an email of August 13, 2003, a representative from the Ridges Sanctuary informed me that "the story of the women laying down in front of earth-moving equipment is a myth. Several local and seasonal residents, both men and women, formed a group which was responsible for preserving the area eventually known as The Ridges Sanctuary, Inc" (Paul).

She further notes that scientists aren't as easily allowed to associate research findings about, for example, "sea-birds nesting on a remote Arctic island with the drought in the West. But as a poet, you certainly can"

Niedecker's fascination with the Drosera plant is evidenced by its encore performance in her later poem "Darwin," in which she writes that the scientist "[b]rought home Drosera—/ saw insects trapped / by its tentacles— the fact / that a plant should secrete // an acid acutely akin / to the digestive fluid / of an animal!" (298).

Lorna Jowett also notes Niedecker's use of the natural world to encode or project emotion, and gives the example of the poet's "Club 26" where she writes of having drinks with friends at a bar and staying "till the stamens trembled" (Jowett 82).

"Cone" also denotes the light-sensitive cell present in the retina of the eye that responds to bright light and is responsible for sharpness of vision and color perception (Oxford 298), and suggests a visual perception that Niedecker's mother would have engaged with. As well, the verbal association of the coneflower, a plant of the daisy family with cone-shaped flowers, may connect this passage to Niedecker's mother Daisy, who Niedecker and Zukofsky nicknamed "BP." Penberthy notes that BP was short for "bean-pole," but also is an abbreviation of Bellis perennis, the Latin species name for daisy (Corr. 108).

The stamens and anthers of the closed gentian are united into a tube and fertilization takes place within the closed flowers (Linn 238).

A photograph of a sign for "Wintergreen" in Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet suggests that there is a "Wintergreen" trail, though it is not clear that this is the location Niedecker refers to in this stanza (WP 294). Wintergreen, Gaultheria procumbens, grows year-round but exhibits "continual life through change" as it flowers in the summer and grows red, edible, aromatic berries in the fall and winter (Linn 62). "The bruised leaves have the flavor of wintergreen" (62) and the flowers and berries also smell of minty wintergreen. The leaf is even an ingredient in the famously minty "Tom's" toothpaste.

While a complete comparison of the interactions between these two poems is beyond the scope of this paper, I would argue that "Wintergreen Ridge" also addresses other aspects of "Asphodel": "Asphodel," written to Williams' wife Flossie in a structure of complete sentences within the three-line form, discusses human love and employs, for example, images of flowers pressed and faded, of Helen of Troy as the beautiful face that lies behind every woman, and of silverwhite women in a field. "Wintergreen Ridge" employs a three-stanza form composed in phrases, and responds to Williams' images with stolid activist women, live flowers protected in their biodiverse ecotone, invocation of multiple discourses, and varied means of perceiving or knowing a region. The relationships in Niedecker's poem are drawn from examples in the landscape, and don't deal as overtly with romantic love as Williams' poem. Some of the individual lines in Niedecker's poem may respond to Williams' words as well. He writes, for instance, "Silence can be complex too, / but you do not get far / with silence" (148) while Niedecker writes of silence that it "makes sound" (Collected 253). As well, Niedecker's feminist constructions of women and association of composition with the vibrancy of scent could be a response to lines in Williams' poem such as these in the Coda: "At the altar / so intent was I // before my vows, / so moved by your presence / a girl so pale // and ready to faint / that I pitied / and wanted to protect you. // As I think of it now, / after a lifetime, / it is as if // a sweet-scented flower / were poised / and for me did open. // Asphodel / has no odor / save to the imagination" (155). In all fairness to Williams' art, I should quote the lovely last lines of the
poem that speak to a deep (and desirous) love, and complicate any simplistic gender reading of the poem:
"It is late // but an odor / as from our wedding / has revived me // and begun again to penetrate / into all the crevices / of my world" (155). For further studies of Williams' poem, see Audrey T. Rodgers' *Virgin and Whore: The Image of Women in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (146-148) or Donald W. Markos' *Ideas in Things* (206).
Works Cited:


Paul. [the Ridges Sanctuary representative] "Re: questions." E-mail to the author. 13 August, 2003.


