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Language and Ecology The Textual Ecopoetics of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*[1]

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Abstract

Lyn Hejinian's "language" poetry, while deeply concerned with socio-political engagements of art "after Auschwitz", has also responded to the question of what it means to write poetry in the Anthropocene. Hejinian's experimental postmodern poetry has been criticized for the artificial (de)construction with language that keeps us from engaging with the material world. However, Hejinian takes language as a vantage point from which to re-think our relationship with the material world. This paper draws on *My Life* and her essays to explore how Hejinian creates a textual ecospace with the material forces of language, in which all human and nonhuman forms are inextricably intertwined.

Keywords: Ecology, Language, Lyn Hejinian, Metonymy, *My Life*

Introduction: Poetry after Auschwitz

In her essay *The Language of Inquiry*, Lyn Hejinian responds to Theodor Adorno's statement that "[to] write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism" (2000, 325). This much cited yet controversial statement usually connotes that poetry, and art in general, should acknowledge the limitations in its function to address ethical issues concerning socio-political violence and injustice. So, it is considered "barbaric", for Adorno, to still engage in the cultivation of art after Auschwitz when the human condition has fundamentally changed. Hejinian suggests that "Adorno's statement can be interpreted in another sense, not as a condemnation of the attempt 'after Auschwitz' to write poetry

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but, on the contrary, as a challenge and behest to do so" (*ibidem*). Hejinian asserts, "[p]oetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; […] the poet must assume a barbarian position, […] occupying (and being occupied by) foreignness – by the barbarism of strangeness" (326). While acknowledging Adorno's imperatives, she subverts his dictum regarding the incapacity and irresponsibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz. Hejinian continues,

> poetry at this time, I believe, has the capacity and perhaps the obligation to enter those specific zones known as borders, since borders are by definition addressed to foreignness […]. The border is not an edge along the fringe of society and experience but rather their very middle – their between; it names the condition of doubt and encounter […] – a condition which is simultaneously an impasse and a passage, limbo and transit zone, with checkpoints and bureaus of exchange, a meeting place and a realm of confusion. (326-27)

For Hejinian, barbarism is rather an effective way of carrying out poetic practices, which enables her to explore and embrace difference, strangeness, and, in particular, the Other outside the realm of human civilization. The barbaric "condition of doubt and encounter" provides her with unique opportunities to reconsider the environment or the nonhuman not as something radically "foreign" but as integral part of human life and existence. Hejinian's notion of the barbarian stance, while deeply concerned with socio-political engagements of her experimental poetry, reveals, on the other hand, environmental possibilities of her "language" poetry. Hejinian is associated (along with Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, and so on) with Language poetry of the 1970s, which questions the ideological character of literary language and draws our attention to the role of language to see the poetic text as a construction of language itself. Hejinian, however, moves further to take language as a vantage point from which to explore the nonhuman other, and to re-think our relationship with the material world. "Because we have language", Hejinian says, "we find ourselves in a special and peculiar relationship to the objects, events, and situations which constitute what we imagine of the world" (2000, 49). Her persistent experiments with language and form are geared toward (re)configuring language as a response to the nonhuman we (humans) are entangled with. It is true that such radical forms of Hejinian's language poetry have been accused of constituting a "hermetically sealed textuality" because the artificial (de)construction with language turns us away from "the referential world" (Scigaj 1999, 27, 79) and keeps us from engaging with the material world. However, Hejinian's poetry is far from emphasizing linguistic constructions to the extent that would lead to the exclusion of the material world. Instead, she attempts to bring the material world directly into her textual space by foregrounding textuality as an enactment of our interconnectedness with the material world.

Ecocriticism has by far favored what is traditionally conceived as "nature" poetry such as the works of Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, A.R. Ammons, and Mary Oliver, among other contemporary American poets. However, during the first decades of the twenty-first century, ecocriticism has moved beyond green spaces and the wilderness to reconsider linguistically-oriented textual spaces (Keller 2011, 605), particularly those that help us see nature not as distinct but inseparable from culture – the human realm. In "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?", Joan Retallack claims that experimental avant-garde poetry "adopts nature's manner of operation" (2007). Experimental writings can reflect "the chaotic interconnectedness of all things, the dynamic pattern-bounded indeterminacy in which we find ourselves" (*ibidem*). Angus Fletcher, in *A New Theory for America Poetry*, advocates the type of "environment-poem" that "does not merely suggest or indicate an environment as part of its thematic meaning, but actually gets the reader to enter into the poem as if it were the reader's environment of living"

(2004, 122). All these critics have recognized poetic artifice and experimental forms as a useful method to evoke ecological awareness on the human-nonhuman entanglement.[2]

The language poetry of Hejinian raises fundamental questions of the nature of language and matter, and the place of humans within the material world. However, only a few critics such as Sarah Nolan (2017), by far, have illuminated ecological dimensions of Hejinian's language poetics. This paper, while building upon existing studies on Hejinian, investigates the full implications of Hejinian's ecopoetics in relation to some of the most pressing issues or dilemmas of language and ecology, exploring how the work of Hejinian evokes a sense of materiality in language, and thus of consolidation with the nonhuman or the material world. This paper draws on *My Life* (2013) and her essays to examine how Hejinian creates a textual ecospace with the material forces of language, in which all human and nonhuman forms, living and non-living beings, are shown to be interconnected. I aim to demonstrate that the textuality of her language poetry does not mean a withdrawal from the material world or a lack of environmental engagement. Hejinian's strategy to foreground the material dimensions of language is much more than simply formal playfulness; it is a *formal* embodiment of the material world.

1. Language and Ecology

Human language is, simultaneously, materially real and socially constructed. It is both part of nature and culture. Language is in part nature; it is an integral part of our biological organism. According to Steven Pinker, language is biological – it is something we are born with: "human language is a part of human biology – an instinct" (2007, 11). We have a language "instinct", Pinker claims, "people know how to talk in more or less the sense that spiders know how to spin webs" (5). We can hear Pinker's resilient echo in *The Ecopoetry Anthology* where the editor Laura-Gray Street repeats that "We are language-making creatures in the same way that spiders are web-making creatures" (2013, xxxvii). Pinker is associated with Noam Chomsky, who, similarly, claims that language is "part of our biological endowment, genetically determined"; a child's language ability gradually unfolds according to a genetic blueprint unique to humans in much the same way as the child "grow arms and legs rather than wings" (1988, 4). Language, however, is also a part of culture. It is a "technology" (semiotic and information technology) that has evolved and changed over time. According to Daniel Everett, language is an artifact and a cultural product. It is "a cultural tool" and, like the "bow and arrow", it was invented and shaped by human culture (2012, 19-20). It is a sign system developed over the course of human history. Languages have evolved "to fit the [cultural] conditions of their use. As conditions change, languages change" (234). For Everett, culture determines the form of language while it is reflected in the form of language.

Furthermore, language is not merely a medium of representation but also a kind of material substance we have biologically and culturally evolved with. Regarding the coevolution of human and language, we can find compelling accounts by Terrence Deacon, as well as Morten Christiansen and Nick Chater. Deacon claims that the human brain (in size and function) has co-evolved with language by which he means that it has been shaped by language. According

[2] It is notable that, at the turn of the new millennium, ecological anthologies began to accommodate previously overlooked experimental or investigative poems. *The Arcadia project* (Corey and Waldrep 2012) includes Hejinian, and *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (Fisher-Wirth and Street 2013) includes Jorie Graham, another important experimental poet in America. Scholars have also discussed ecopoetics of avant-garde poets such as Black Mountain writers (Rasula 2012) and some contemporary British poets (Bloomfield 2013).

to Deacon, the symbolic system of language has produced a phenomenon as remarkable as a human mind, the one that we consider to be uniquely human (1997, 89). Language itself is part of the process that is responsible for the evolution of the human brain. On the other hand, Christiansen and Chater (while responding to Chomsky) argue that "language is more likely to have been shaped to fit the human brain than the other way round" (2018, 42). It is language itself which has evolved in coordination with human learning and processing. In other words, language has adapted to the abilities of the human brain: it is "subject to adaptive pressures from the human brain" (41).

All of these studies while often contradicting one another, suggest that humans are inexorably entwined with language, one conditioning and shaping the other. Language is both cultural (artificial/mind) and natural (biological/brain), and part of the human (spiritual) as well as the nonhuman (material). Everett borrows a term from George Harrison from the Beatles, to claim that "language is 'within you and without you' " (qtd. in Everett 2012, 37). These two aspects of language seem to be contradictory and even incompatible. To use a Quantum metaphor, they are in a state of "supposition", like Erwin Schrödinger's cat paradox of the wave-particle duality (Gribbin 1984, 203), while our cognitive capacity may not allow us to see them both at the same time. It is this dual nature of language that betrays the entangled reality of culture and nature, as well as human and nonhuman. Language constructs our mind to see the world while we use language to represent the world we see. This mutually exclusive yet "complementary" (in Niels Bohr's sense) nature of language enables us to reconsider the value and role of language experiments as a strategy to encounter and experience the other from within and a way to imagine and (re)view us from without.[3] Language is both natural and cultural, biological and artificial, and material and spiritual: it itself is an epitome of the complex web of the human-nonhuman entanglement.[4]

2. Poetry as Landscape

Hejinian is keenly aware of the dual nature of language with which she attempts to redefine the role of language – as both a mediating tool and an obstacle, both a window and a (self-reflecting) mirror. For Hejinian, language itself constitutes the "border", which is simultaneously "an impasse and a passage" (2000, 327). Words are artificial, and thus, unable to connect humans to the real world around them. Language is a sign system that makes us see the world only in abstract, generalized, and rational ways. Since the invention of alphabetical writing, David Abram claims, the textual signifier has lost all iconic connection to the signified (1997, 102). Abram argues that, because of the sensuous nature of our perception our language

[3] In the quantum world, atoms appear to be "either" particles "or" waves; they have both wave-like and particle-like behaviors even though the properties of waves and of particles are mutually exclusive. We cannot observe both the wave and particle states simultaneously. For Schrödinger, this is an absurd notion because these two states then are superposed like a cat being neither dead nor alive until we open the box to see it either alive or dead. Bohr, on the other hand, accepts the wave-particle duality as a principle of physics, holding that a complete knowledge of such a quantum phenomenon requires a "complementary" account of both wave and particle properties (Gribbin 1984, 160).

[4] The dual nature of language is instrumental in bringing about the entanglement of the human and nonhuman as it redirects our attention to the material dimension of language. Scott Knickerbocker, in *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*, advocates the type of innovative poetry that "rematerializes language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature [and] operates from the assumption that humans (and their tools, including language) are inseparable from the rest of nature" (2012, 2).

(songs and stories of oral cultures) is inherently participatory in and intimately connected with the surrounding environment; but it has been gradually removed from the material world, due to the alphabetic abstraction and written representation (1997, 93-102). The shift from an oral culture to a literate culture has dampened human sensory perceptions and disrupted the profound human connection to nature. Abram suggests that it is the way we interact with language that defines the degree of our connectedness with the environment; a significant insight that illuminates Hejinian's purpose of language experimentation, which would enable us to (re)enter the nonhuman world.

Since the alphabetic language, disconnected from the surrounding environment, fundamentally determines the nature of representation and thus our relation to nature,[5] Hejinian denounces any "desire for accurate representation" as a "mania for panorama" ensued from the act of "cataloguing the travel books in the library", from the use of human rationality to organize the natural territory (2013, 47). For Hejinian, it is rather the failure of language to represent the world that provides us with a unique opportunity to see more clearly the hazy and shifting "border" where we encounter "foreignness", where we acquire an access to the nonhuman world (2000, 326). For Hejinian, the limitation of language allows the poet to reject the mimetic language as a reflection of the human mind rather than an accurate rendering of the world. Mimetic representation is a distortion of the world, resulting from the "undifferentiated" use of language. Therefore, Hejinian explains, "the incapacity of language to match the world permits us to distinguish our ideas and ourselves from the world and things in it from each other. The undifferentiated is one mass, the differentiated is multiple" (56). Hejinian's Language poetry follows what she considers Gertrude Stein's strategy to "disassemble conventional structures through which language, in mediating between us (thought) and the world (things), becomes instead a barrier, blocking meaning, limiting knowledge, excluding experience" (97). Hejinian rejects, as does Stein, the conventional syntax and page layout arranged to manage, order, and control textual materials and, as a result, destabilizes the frame of reference that underpins the anthropocentric scheme.

The traditional nature poetry engages in what Timothy Morton, in *Ecology without Nature*, dubs "ecomimesis" (2007, 35), which describes the belief that our transparent language can represent things that we as subject have access to through our mind. For Morton, ecomimesis is fundamentally a reflection of an anthropocentric world view, which has led to the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves today. Ecomimesis separates the world into the ontologically distinct domains of words and things. Morton's insights bring us back to Hejinian's underlying the philosophy of language poetics that language is both a human invention and a natural object: there is no ontological distinction between language and what it purports to represent. Hejinian says, "language is an order of reality itself and not a mere mediating medium" (2000, 90); thus, "it blurs, and perhaps even effaces the distinction between subject and object, since language is neither, being intermediate between the two" (23). For Hejinian, language is not as much a cultural artifice or construction as it is natural objects or things in nature. This means that language is primarily our means not of representing or mimicking, but of (re)connecting with nature, in and outside of us.

[5] It is the very nature of alphabetic writing that dislocates humans from their experiential connection to the natural world. Kate Rigby points out that it is precisely this "tendency of alphabetic writing" that "directs [our] consciousness away from the materiality of the more-than-human world around us towards the ideational world" (2014, 360). Paul Shepard adds that it is difficult to describe "a deep sense of engagement with the landscape" in English because "[i]ts noun and verb organization shapes a divided world of static doers separate from the doing" (2014, 65).

Hejinian views language not just as "an impasse" but as "a passage" (327), through which we (re)enter the material world. She investigates the ways in which language can bring the material world into the text by composing experimental poetry that adopts "nature's *manner* of operation" (Retallack 2007) and that "gets the reader to enter" the environment (Fletcher 2004, 122). Hejinian once quoted Francis Ponge in her essay to argue that "[i]n order for a text to expect in any way to render an account of reality of the concrete world (or the spiritual one) it must first attain reality in its own world, the textual one" (2000, 95-96). Ponge's concept of poetry as the transposition of "the concrete world" into the textual space of verbal arrangement bespeaks Hejinian's underlying desire to create a textual ecospace that embodies the material world in linguistic forms: "I wanted to propose writing as a material manifestation, an embodiment, of desire for reality" (26). Hejinian's notion of "writing as a material manifestation" echoes Morton, who equates texts to ecologies, claiming that the structures and dynamics of the world can be mirrored and embedded in the text, "in its formal, material and affective qualities" (Morton 2012, 11). For both Hejinian and Morton, nature is not something that is outside of us (to be represented), instead we are enmeshed with it. We are part of this selfsame "mesh", the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things (Morton 2011, 22).

Therefore, to (re)enter into the material world, Hejinian removes the referential or representational distance between subject and object by creating a text that is unambiguously artificial. When words are artificially constructed (not treated as a transparent means of representation), they become "objectified": they are artificial but natural "things", no different from any other things in nature. It is because construction and objectification entail the materiality of language and of the poem as a whole. This dual nature of language lies at the heart of Hejinian's Language poetics which erases the distinction between culture and nature. Hejinian's use of textual space for material manifestation is a way to regard, to borrow the titles of Morton's works, "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology" (2010), which is no other than considering *Ecology without Nature* (2007).[6] By removing the representational distance of language, the old world of human foreground and natural background is eliminated in Hejinian's textual ecospace, which allows the reader to be directly immersed in the material forces of language. This is the way, she says, "We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world – to close the gap between ourselves and things" (2000, 56). Hejinian's textual space where human and nonhuman are shown to be enmeshed with no middle-ground enables her to recognize that "language is the principal medium through which we objectify things and our experience of them. […] It's through language, after all, that we discover our nonautonomous being" (69).

When language is treated as an object, the linguistic material acquires its own agency on the page. The material that comprises the physical world also comprises the elements of language. Hejinian's language, like an object in nature, exists all on its own; it has its own force and its own uniqueness. Language is granted a material agency: it functions as a natural object itself that comes alive in the text, not as a (dead) means to represent it. Hejinian's poetry, then, is not "about" reality; it itself "is" a reality. The materiality of language brings nature and language together on the page so that it effectively removes the distinction between the inside and

[6] Morton, in "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology", has drawn attention to some perceived similarities between text and ecology. He says, "life forms cannot be said to differ in a rigorous way from texts" (2010, 1). He also suggests in *Ecology without Nature* (2007) that the traditional notions of text as "representing" the outside reality and of ecology as "constituting" such a reality (without us) should be abolished as they only reinforce the distance (middle-ground) between culture and nature, the human and the nonhuman.

outside of the text that creates the old hierarchy between subject and object, and human and nonhuman. Hejinian's poetry is not to be considered "hermetically sealed" (as Scigaj would claim) with no relation to the physical world we actually live in; it rather enters into relation "with" that world.

In Hejinian's poetry, the textual world and the material world come together to form a "landscape" – a textual ecospace. In her discussion of Stein, titled "Grammar and Landscape", Hejinian draws a parallel between language and landscape. Hejinian claims that "landscape and grammar were what Stein herself was simultaneously writing and thinking about (the two for her are almost inseparable)" (2000, 109). For Stein, Hejinian continues, grammar and landscape are always open to change, "being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail" (110). Hejinian draws our attention to the associative nature of language and material matters: "The effect [Stein] was seeking are landscape effects" (117). Stein's idea of landscape writing can find its more inclusive substantiation or manifestation in Hejinian's language experiments. While reading Hejinian's poems, we are fully immersed in the networks of language as in the networks of the material world, in which we find all the patches, repetitions, patterns, matrixes weaved together to form a landscape. Hejinian's notion of grammar (and of poetry for that matter) as landscape should not be mistaken that it is merely a linguistic structure. Hejinian imagines poetry as a landscape in and of itself and presents the poetic text as an ecospace – a textually constructed landscape. Hejinian's landscape, as we will see in *My Life*, creates a complex web of entanglement in which words and things are inextricably intertwined in one drama and engaged with the existence of each other.

3. My Life*: Textual Ecospace*

Hejinian's *My Life,* perhaps her most widely read and acclaimed work, foregrounds textual artificiality, which challenges the popular mode of autobiographic narratives. Unlike the traditional practice of the genre, the work presents a highly disjunctive narrative with a series of fragmentary memories, thoughts, and reflections. Hejinian writes her autobiography not by rendering events of her past in chronological order, but by textually enacting the complex interrelations and encounters between material objects themselves, and between the human and nonhuman. With the use of shifting pronouns and references, and cumulative repetition or recombination, the poem enacts the fragmented, disjointed, and uncertain reality, on the textual space. Sarah Nolan observes that *My Life* "express[es] the complex multiplicity and diversity of an environmental experience in text"; this is accomplished "through explorations in forms that can most closely preserve the multifaceted and divergent facets of lived experience" (2017, 18). While it is "the limited medium of language", as Nolan argues, that "compels [Hejinian] toward formal experimentation, language play" (47), Hejinian's ecological vision of linguistic experimentation is deeply rooted in her recognition of the dual nature of language – being both artifact and nature, human and nonhuman. Language, rather than being limited, is fundamentally entangled with nature, which creates the condition that allows Hejinian to explore the material dimensions of language. Her language, while being an artifact ("language play"), is not contrary to nature.

When *My Life* was first published in 1980, it contained 37 sections composed of 37 sentences each, which corresponded to Hejinian's age, 37, at the time. Seven years later, in 1987 when she turned 45, she published an updated version with 45 sections composed of 45 sentences each. New sections and sentences were added to the original 37 sections and sentences while

the original was not altered. In 2003, Hejinian published *My Life in the Nineties,* a separate work that covers 10 additional years. In 2013, Wesleyan University Press released *My Life and My life in the Nineties*, which combines the 1987 *My Life* and the 2003 *My life in the Nineties* (this paper uses the 2013 version). The extensive revisions and repetitions of these sections and sentences make the text decidedly artificial while granting the words objective (or natural) status as discrete pieces of material substance. Each section begins with a kind of epigraph, a tagline phrase in italics set off from the main body of the poem. These phrases are repeated with slight variations, and at various frequencies throughout the text, which emphasizes the artificiality of the text and the material existence of language.

> *A pause, a rose*
> *something on pape,*
>
> A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple – though moments are no longer so colored. Somewhere, in the background, rooms share a pattern of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does. In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of prenecessity. The better things were gathered in a pen. The windows were narrowed by white gauze curtains which were never loosened. Here I refer to irrelevance, the rigidity which never intrudes. Hence, repetitions, free from all ambition. (Hejinian 2013, 3, section 1)

For example, the tagline of the first section quoted above, "a pause, a rose, something on paper", appears again several more times throughout the book: "Rose" is placed "on paper, in a nature scrapbook" in section 3 (8); it becomes "the pattern on the floor [that] repeats. Pink, and rosy, quartz" in section 4 (9); and it surfaces in "the slippery love-seat, upholstered in a pattern of roses" in section 8 (18). The flower "rose" appears in different forms, each time being associated with different objects around it ("scrapbook", "floor", and "love-seat"). "Things are different," the speaker repeats the phrase once again, "but not separate, thoughts are discontinuous but not unmotivated (like a rose without pause)", in section 39 (83).

Words and things may be considered as distinct entities, but they are "not separate"; they interact with one another, with their own vibrant energy and possibility of meaning. The tagline phrase undergoes many transpositions and transformations, being "motivated associatively by its context" (Clark 1991, 326) where it finds syntactic and "semantic associations with the surrounding material" (325). There is no fundamental difference between words and things in Hejinian's textual ecospace, in which we find various material forms of linguistic elements. The repetitions and manipulations of certain words and phrases enact the ongoing interactions of the material world as they continuously crisscross and feed back into each other. As Hejinian expounds, "Language consists of a vast array of strategies and situations for discovering and making meaning. It not only exists in multitudes of context, it is multitudes of context" (2000, 162). Meaning comes from language in action; it creates a variety of contexts as it moves by association, being entangled in the web of material interconnections.

My Life as an autobiographical poem is not a story of a human subject who assumes a privileging position from which to speak. Each object or event exists in its own right and interacts contextually or associatively with other elements. As we can see in the first section, the passage that concerns her first year (perhaps an early childhood memory) offers the reader an undefined "moment yellow"; perhaps it is the speaker's emotional color (warm yellow) associated with her father's welcoming return from the war, which is also evoked by the "background" "pattern" of the wallpaper (the pattern of roses on the wallpaper). All the discrete events and ideas ("roses", "father", "room", "yellow", "pattern") are, far from forming a backdrop for the human narrative, foregrounded as distinct, particular raw materials that, while fragmentary, constitute the narrator's lived experience – memory. As the speaker asserts in later sections, "What memory is not a 'gripping' thought. Only fragments are accurate" (Hejinian 2013, 44); "A fragment is not a fraction but a whole piece" (70). Hejinian's textual ecospace renders the "whole piece", in which various agents of human and nonhuman interact with one another to form or manifest what we call "reality".

In *My Life,* there is no fixed, controlling locus of meaning. All words and things form a web of entangled relations with each other, from which arises meaning. Hejinian's treatment of language and matter is comparable to New Materialists' conceptualization of material agency as matter's emergent force: materials are now considered not as mere objects but agents or "vibrant matters" that have the capacity to "animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 2010, 6). Agency, according to Karen Barad, is no longer "aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity", but rather distributed across various human-nonhuman networks (2007, 177). In Hejinian's poem, all the objects, events, ideas acquire, in Barad's terms, their agential forces only through the "intra-action" with each other (33). They are "produced" from "intra-actions", rather than from pre-established bodies that participate in action or "interaction" with each other. *My Life,* therefore, becomes a poem about its own process of coming into existence. To borrow Oppermann's terms, "discourse and matter are inextricably entangled, and they constitute life's narrative and life itself" (Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 462).[7]

Hejinian's main trope in *My Life* is metonymy, which serves to define one thing by means of its relation to something else. Hejinian claims that "[m]etonymy moves attention from thing to thing […] maintain[ing] the intactness and discreteness of particulars" (2000, 148). Metonymy explores relationships of contiguity between things. According to the structural linguist Roman Jakobson, metaphor refers to "the internal relation of similarity" while metonymy works for "the external relation of contiguity" (1956, 68-69). Where a metaphor replaces one object with another, metonymy uses one object to refer to another. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan analyzes metaphor and metonymy in terms of condensation and displacement. In metaphor, all the discrete (dream) elements are condensed into one to make sense; in metonymy, they are displaced within a signifying chain (1966, 425). Moreover, cognitive theorists point out that metonymy is more directly experientially motivated than metaphor. Metonymy is anchored in our material experience: it involves "direct physical or causal associations" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 39). This material basis of metonymy underscores Hejinian's construction of the linguistic

[7] The ecological dimension of Hejinian's experimental poetry can be aligned with the current ecological insights of New Materialists (Bennett 2015; Barad 2007; Iovino and Oppermann 2012). They position the human as a material being shaped by material forces; a material being entangled with all nonhuman forms. Thus, the human species is relocated "within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities" (Coole and Frost 2010, 10). New Materialism situates humans and culture (ideas and values) "within the fields of material forces and power relations that reproduce and circumscribe their existence and coexistence" (28).

text in a material form that recreates "the multiplicity of original material experiences" (Nolan 2017, 47) and that embodies the material landscape in the textual space.

Metonymy figures Hejinian's characteristic style of "[c]omposition by juxtaposition", which "presents observed phenomena without merging them, [...] while attempting also to represent the matrix of their proximities" (Hejinian 2000, 155). Hejinian defines the act of writing as "field work", where "one moves through the work not in straight lines but in curves, swirls, and across intersections, to words that catch the eye or attract attention repeatedly" (43-44). Therefore, Hejinian's field composition is driven by metonymy that weaves together discrete things and events while moving through complex associative chains and networks in which they are embedded. Hejinian explains:

> Metonymy moves restlessly, through an associative network [...]. But because even the connections between things may become things in themselves, and because any object may be rendered into its separate component parts which then become things in themselves, metonymy [...] may at the same time serve as a generative and even a dispersive force. (149)

Hejinian's notion of metonymy "as a generative and even a dispersive force" echoes the New Materialist's notion of agency, which is emergent (not inherent) and manifests itself only as it is distributed throughout the network of the human-nonhuman assemblage. Agency, in other words, is distributed in ways material forces are dispersed to form a web of entanglement with the human. It is this agential force of metonymy that continuously generates yet disperses meanings and contexts throughout the text. As Hejinian remarks, "[l]anguage is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts. Such contexts rarely coalesce into images, rarely come to terms. They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation into relation" (1).

While language itself "produces" meaning (rather than meaning being conveyed by language), meaning arises from the performance of language. For Hejinian, the move-ability of language depends on metonymy as its agential force, which emerges as it is distributed throughout the "associative network" (149). Jesse Oak Taylor (while discussing works of Charles Dickens) claims, "[i]n literary terms, distributed agency [is] [...] closely aligned with metonymy". He says, "[m]etonymy is contingent, arbitrary, adjacent, elusive – in a word, *atmospheric*" (2016, 28). In *My Life*, even the autobiographical events and ideas, when mediated by metonymy, move into new stories and histories, rather than being fixed in a particular time and space. For Hejinian, they are, in Ron Silliman's terms (another Language poet), "decidedly contextual object[s]" (1987, 92).

In *My Life*, the world mediated by metonymy appears to be full of discrete objects and fragmentary thoughts, which are however conjoined within the network of relation. Hejinian states that "all this is metonymy"; "Not fragments but metonymy" (2013, 48, 49). One fitting example of the distributed agency of metonymy can be found in the later part of the first section, where things are interconnected by physical or conceptual proximity.

> But a word is a bottomless pit. It became magically pregnant and one day split open, giving birth to a stone egg, about as big as a football. In May when the lizards emerge from the stones, the stones turn gray, from green. When daylight moves, we delight in distance. The waves rolled over our stomachs, like spring rain over an orchard slope. Rubber bumpers on rubber cars. (Hejinian 2013, 3-4, section 1)

The "word" is described as "a bottomless pit", which is characterized as being "pregnant". Like a female womb, it "split[s] open" to give birth to "a stone egg", out of which, amusingly,

hatch "the lizards" – they "emerge from the stones". The associations of (bottomless) word, (pregnant) womb, (stone) egg, and lizard (from stone) are based on continuity because they coexist in some form of adjacency in a conceptual schema. The word "bottomless pit" stands in the contiguous relation to the deepness of womb ("pregnant"), which takes the form of "stone egg", which then produces the "lizards" ("from the stones"). One word is continuously displaced by another as it evokes or "[gives] birth to" the other in a successive manner. This is the "[magic]" of the "word", whose agential forces (metonymy) are dispersed over the "associative network". This childhood period must have been a very pleasant, *fruitful* time for the poet. We hear that, while the family members are separated, they remain happy ("we delight in distance") because of the grace of "daylight", which is associated with "delight" in sound. The "spring rain", which "roll[s] over" the "orchard slope", grows fruits we eat ("stomach"), while the bounteous "rubber" trucks carry the harvested fruits for sale. The rolling "wave" is evoked by the "spring rain" and associated with "our [rumbling] stomachs" desiring for fruits, which will feed us and fill the lovely "rubber [lover] cars". All the words and things here are interconnected in their metonymic relation, and all the possibilities of meaning emerge only from their interactions with each other.

My Life refuses to be organized by grammatical structures and metaphorical logics, which would sanction a hierarchical relationship between subject and object, and tenor and vehicle. However, despite the discontinuous and disjunctive narrative, we can still venture into her past or into the fragments of her anecdotes. We can get a glimpse into her life from contextual threads and associative nodes that interweave discrete events and ideas. The poem in section 20, which roughly corresponds to her college years (she received a bachelor's degree in 1963 at 23 years old), describes the times during which Hejinian grew up to be a person and a poet. The narrative moves forward by a metonymic, horizontal relation of contiguity between discrete events and ideas.

> T*he coffee drinkers answered ecstatically*
>
> The traffic drones, where drones is a noun. Whereas the cheerful pessimist suits herself in a bad world, which is however the inevitable world, impossible of improvement. I close one eye, always the left, when looking out onto the glare of the street. What education finally serves us, if at all. There is a pause, a rose, something on paper. The small green shadows make the red jump out. That is not a telescope, nor do I have stars in my belly. Such displacements alter allusions, which is all-to-the-good. Now cars not cows wander on the brown hills, and a stasis of mobile homes have taken their names from what grew in the valleys near Santa Clara. We have all grown up with it. If it is personal, it is most likel fickle. The university was the cultural market but on Sundays she tried out different churches. (Hejinian 2013, 44, section 20)

Unlike her happy childhood, her college years appear to be not so much productive. She feels her life somewhat stagnated, as if stuck in a "traffic" jam, with no progress or "improvement". The early 1960s were a turbulent era defined by the Cold War, the war in Vietnam, the struggle for civil rights, and the women's movement. The poet became rather a "cheerful pessimist" in this "bad world" as the college education ("cultural market") made her "close one eye, always the left when looking out onto the glare of the street": "What education finally serves us, if at all". This is, certainly, a period of "pause" (stagnation) for her. And the "rose", once a warm and lovely flower for a child, has turned out to be an illusion: "something on paper". While the tagline phrase ("a pause, a rose, something on paper") is repeated here, with its words unaltered, its meaning is completely displaced in this context. The poet proclaims, "Such displacements alter illusions, which is all-to-the-good" – this becomes another tagline phrase to be repeated throughout the text. This "pause" period of the paper-rose, for Hejinian, means "a stasis of mobile home", which "grows on roads" whose "names" are taken "from what grew in the valleys near Santa Clara. We have all grown up with it". The thrice-repeated word "grow" functions as a metonymic link that connects the different events and thoughts. What appears to be a small functional verb ("grow") becomes a major interweaving connective – a site of potential for multiple conjunctions – as it acquires its own material existence in the metonymic field. As Hejinian says, "even the connections between things may become things in themselves" (2000, 149).

The distributed agency of metonymy that appears to operate within the textual realm is indeed the function of aesthetic communication of the author, the text, and the reader, involved in the production of meaning. Conventional autobiographies postulate a hierarchical relationship between the author and the reader, as the author assumes an exclusive agency while the reader remains outside the text as an audience. However, as Juliana Spahr observes, *My Life* is "a process-centered work," which is to be "constructed by both author and reader" (1996, 147). Hejinian's textual ecospace remains "open" to different interpretations and different artistic interactions. Hejinian relates that

> [t]he 'open text', by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. (2000, 43)

My Life allows the reader to participate in making sense of the text by bringing their own contexts to it. Meaning does not reside within the text as a prefixed or pre-programmed linguistic code; it is something to be "produced", and thus, communicated only through the interactions between the participating bodies.

Hejinian makes the inherently self-sufficient autobiographical poem (closed system) entirely open by sharing authority with the reader, by allowing the reader to "take on agency" (Spahr 1996, 147), in interpreting, and thus, shaping the text. This is the cooperative act of creating "meaning", which does not belong exclusively to the text, author, or reader. Meaning is not an inherent property; it manifests itself as it is distributed over the network of communication between the poet, the reader, and the text. Hejinian's landscape is an "open system", which maintains itself through the interaction not only between elements within but between the author and the reader without.[8] This dynamics of distributed agency is one of the most

[8] Hejinian's notion of "open text" is similar to Muriel Rukeyser's concept of the "triadic scheme" between poet, poem and reader (Rukeyser 1996, 51). Rukeyser (a mid-twentieth century American poet) states that we must

compelling features of Hejinian's textual ecospace, as it brings into view a full range of interconnectedness and interdependencies not only of words and things but of readers and writers. *My Life* illuminates the symbiotic nature of (co)existence between the reader and the writer, language and the material, and by extension, the human and nonhuman.

Conclusion: Poetry in the Anthropocene

Hejinian's poetry, while addressing Adorno's concern of what it means to write "poetry after Auschwitz", has also implicitly responded to perhaps a more compelling question of what it means to write poetry in the Anthropocene, the epoch of geologic time defined by human impacts on the planet's ecosystems. The ecological harms such as species extinction and global warming caused by humans also pose a significant threat to human survival. Jeremy Davies, in *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, asserts a "pressing need to re-imagine human and nonhuman life outside the confines of the Holocene", while posing the question of "how best to keep faith with the web of relationships, dependencies, and symbioses that made up the planetary system of the dying epoch" (2016, 209). Hejinian's poetry may serve as an aesthetic answer to Davies' question and to a more specific question, for that matter, raised by Jane Bennett:

> [How] to find new techniques, in speech and art and mood, to disclose the participation of nonhuman in "our" world. This would require the invention and deployment of a grammar that was less organized around subjects and objects and more capable of avowing the presence of what Bruno Latour called "actants". (2015, 225)

While Hejinian's poetry does not explicitly consider nature or environmental issues, we acquire, through the materiality of language, a renewed sense of material dimensions of human existence or coexistence with the nonhuman other. Hejinian's linguistic experiment that embraces the foreign, unnameable, and unpredictable enables her to make her home permanently at the border, which is "occupied by ever-shifting images, involving objects and events constantly in need of redefinition and even renaming, and viewed against a constantly changing background" (Hejinian 2000, 327). This is a barbarian way of life – always dwelling at the border, exploring the linguistic possibility of coexistence with the other on an equal footing. Hejinian says, in Peter Nicholls's terms, this is "a way of acknowledging the world and others without seeking to reduce them to objects of knowledge" (qtd. in Hejinian 2000, 332).

This profound sense of border-dwelling in Hejinian's poetry fosters an ethical stance that insists that the activities and the discursive practices of humans are always part of, and thus responsible for, the material world.[9] As Stacy Alaimo argues, "we must hold ourselves accountable to a materiality that is never merely an external, blank, or inert space but the active, emergent

"recognize the energies that are transferred between people when a poem is given and taken" (183). As I argued elsewhere, this triadic scheme allows for communication and the production of meaning through transformation of energy or interpretive power between the author, the text, and the reader – the idea that anticipates Charles Olson's projective verse and "open field" composition (Ryoo 2020, 134-36).

[9] Matthew Jenkins in his discussion on linguistically experimental poets (including Hejinian) distinguishes ethics from morality. Morality, he argues, is "essentially rule-based […] universal or situational" while ethics "is oriented through formal experimentation toward what is other, toward the *Other*" (2008, 3). Morality contrives social and political control while ethics seeks "the nonrational, non-systematizable Other" (7). Jenkins points out that the ethics of Hejinian's poem (he is referring to Hejinian's collection *The Cell*) is "a formal response to what morality cannot bring into its systematized context" (188). I use the term "ethics" in Jenkins's sense, distinguishing it from the typical notion of "morality", while extending it toward a more nonhuman-oriented other.

substance of ourselves and others" (2012, 563-64). Hejinian's experimentation with language allows for the emergence of an ethical position that encourages responsible interactions between the human and nonhuman. The ethical stance of *My Life* stresses an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and other, including the nonhuman other. Hejinian states that this is "a sense of interconnectedness, of belonging, not so much one's own belonging as the belonging of things, a sense of the intricate vast *durée* known as the world […]. That is the autobiography to write" (2007, 115-16). It is Hejinian's textual ecospace that allows us to (re) engage with the material world, which may bring a different and more ecologically ethically-oriented configuration of the world.

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