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"Poetry Doesn'T Restore Ecosystems": Garbage And Poetry In The Anthropocene

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“POETRY DOESN’T RESTORE ECOSYSTEMS”: GARBAGE AND POETRY IN THE
ANTHROPOCENE

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the representation of material garbage in American poetry, from the development of industrial waste management in the late nineteenth century to the present day ecological crises. In the early to mid-twentieth century, garbage serves as a new Romantic nature, allowing poems' speakers to reflect on themselves and their society through this trashed landscape. The presence of the material garbage itself, however, was never a central concern and continued to be hidden behind its various metaphorical utilizations. A.R. Ammons's poem *Garbage* opened up the poetic conversation by searching for a more nuanced and worldly treatment of garbage. The twenty-first century brought the Anthropocene, an era in which human civilization was wreaking large-scale, long term environmental damage comparable to and often more extreme than natural disasters. Conceptual works like those of Kenneth Goldsmith highlight the difficult poetry has in emphasizing its own materiality without adding more to the landfills. Contemporary poets of waste and nature face the question of ethical responsibility regarding the extent to which they should necessarily endorse environmental activism. Following this, a new task for these poets includes acknowledging and mobilizing what Margaret Ronda has called poetry's "obsolescence." Given this obsolescence, some poets have found a degree of success in drawing on their locale for subject matter and for readership, a focus that may hold promise for engaging in environmental activism through poetry.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
INTRODUCTION: GARBAGE AND POETRY	1
CHAPTER I: GARBAGE IN THE PASTORAL	15
CHAPTER II: TRASHING THE PASTORAL WITH AMMONS'S <i>GARBAGE</i>	45
CHAPTER III: URGENCY AND AFFECT IN THE ANTHROPOCENE	76
CHAPTER IV: CONFRONTING POETRY'S OWN MATERIALITY.....	103
CONCLUSION: TRANSPARENCY, LOCALITY, OBSOLESCENCE	128
WORKS CITED.....	134

INTRODUCTION: GARBAGE AND POETRY

One compelling narrative about poetry in the second-half of the twentieth century suggests that the poets of the period come in various ways under the thrall of the everyday. Certainly modernist poets also demonstrate a devotion to day-to-day life, but, as Andrew Epstein has recently argued, the poets of the second half of the century embrace the ordinary not so much to suggest that is extraordinary—that a single day in the life of an ordinary man is the equivalent of a vast epic—but precisely to argue for the importance of its ordinariness. In general this orientation to the ordinary frequently translates into the inclusion of ordinary *objects*. Frank O'Hara's mid-century poetry, self-described as a poetics of "I do this, I do that," has become an iconic demonstration of the value and beauty of daily *things*, as his short poem "Today" (1950) exhibits:

Oh! Kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!

You really are beautiful! Pearls,
harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! All
the stuff they've always talked about
still makes a poem a surprise!
These things are with us every day
even on beachheads and biers. They
do have meaning. They're as strong as rocks.

A host of factors preceded O'Hara casually tossing candy into his poetry. Like other poets of the mid- to late twentieth century, O'Hara cultivated an anti-academic brand of

poetry which aimed to steer clear of categorical schools and manifestos. O'Hara's peculiar catalogs are, Andrew Epstein explains, "responding to a familiar complaint about the appropriate subject matter for art: there is no room in poetry for trivial and frivolous junk" (10). By the middle of the twentieth century, in other words, many American poets were fully committed to the project of making poetry safe for junk. This project, broadly shared by many figures from this particular historical moment, was not exclusively frivolous or light-hearted. The everyday is inescapable and just as likely to be bewildering as joyful, and the intense attention given to the everyday can in many ways be understood as motivated by the rapidly accelerating cultural, political, and social transformations underway in the aftermath of World War II. The exploration of dailiness wasn't brought into poetry merely to upset the canon or to flatly enjoy the little things; with this exploration came the realization that the flux and ephemerality of even the most trivial commodity was reminiscent of the mortal instability of the human condition.

Within or alongside this sandbox of things poets and theorists similarly sought to reveal the waste of the world. This intense focus on both things in general and waste more specifically share a concrete timeline pertaining broadly to catastrophes shaking humanity's sense of an existence characterized by stability and progress—the atomic bomb, the Holocaust, and WWII on the whole (Epstein 12). Waste—wasted lives, cities, and nature—slaps one in the face to wake up and pay attention. Similarly, the new rapt attention given to the present minded and the everyday "should be seen as a reaction to the rapid and dislocating cultural, political, and social transformations that characterize this epoch" (11). Other than new catastrophic potential WWII also ushered in a fast-paced and fluid culture of new media and increasingly immersive communication

technologies, each accompanied with their own anxieties (11). The fallout of the war and the rest of the century witnessed an unprecedented accumulation of disposable commodities— and, necessarily, disposed of commodities and the accompanying waste. Catastrophe and anxiety however do not define most garbage poetry. To better understand the influence of garbage we need to go back to the 1900's when our contemporary relationship with waste and waste management began to form.

The history of our relationship with post-industrial material garbage is a complex one. For much of the nineteenth century, there was no waste management system to speak of; waste stayed within the bounds of the city, lining the streets or stored in households for repair or repurposing. The majority of food waste was fed to urban livestock or stray animals (Strasser 29). Repairing and reusing was the dominant practice across households of any class, and what couldn't be used could be bartered (Strasser 108). Households bartered their raw materials and recyclables to manufacturers— production relied on taking in waste more than creating it. As manufacturing became increasingly standardized in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, product waste was no longer in the households of consumers but was discarded on site as a direct consequence of manufacturing. For the first time in history, waste disposal was systematically separated from production and consumption (Strasser 109).

As the twentieth century began, waste management techniques kept paced with increasing waste output, enabling rather than discouraging it. Waste became a professional concern, increasingly disposed of or handled by someone other than who produced it (Rogers 50). The science of sanitation and the waste sanitation engineer came into being in large part to address health problems associated with waste disposal. As a

result, burning and burying garbage became popular methods of managing the increasing output of waste and rendering waste less and less invisible (Rogers 77). Alongside these practices, the early twentieth century also saw municipal composting and waste reduction facilities, which were however too expensive to remain prevalent (Rogers 82). After WWII landfills were undoubtedly the dominant method of waste disposal. Their low cost appealed to business and manufacturing, and the U.S. Public Health Service praised their safety and efficiency (Rogers 96). Manufacturers enthusiastically embraced “built-in obsolescence” and the proliferation of plastic gave consumers a host of new things to discard (Rogers 121). Throwaway culture was burgeoning and landfills offered no inspiration to handle waste otherwise. Repairing or repurposing were not only rare practices, but salvaging and scavenging practices of landfills or dumps were increasingly monitored and limited.

In 1970, the first Earth Day celebration— or rather, protest— represents culture’s entry into an environmentalist era. The government, and active supporter of industry and garbage up to this point, instituted environmental laws to protect water and air, and to foster resource conservation. Businesses and manufacturers, following public pressure, reluctantly followed in suit; hiding or understating waste output and environmental damage became and remained common practice (Rogers 129). The momentum continued; in the 1980’s, over 90% of landfills were deemed toxic to some degree, and while their number greatly declined, garbage output continued to steadily increase (Rogers 156). Municipal recycling programs became increasingly popular, and recycling became a long-standing emblem of environmentalism. Responding to public pressure again, manufacturing introduced some degree of recycling or waste prevention into their

production. The 90's brought the realization that the recycling mantra was not nearly enough to counter or reverse the garbage problem (Rogers 156). Change was needed at a systemic level in government and the corporate world.

As waste was continually woven into the fabric of daily life it also became a rich and versatile object of cultural study. The waste of civilization was undeniably a problem. Rogers explains that garbage "is proof that all is not well. Trash therefore has the power to unmask the exploitation of nature that is crystallized in all commodities. Garbage reveals the market's relation to nature; it teases out the environmental politics hidden inside manufactured goods." This sobering reality however has not been *the* sustained narrative of garbage and its relationship with nature (Rogers 231). The way that this problem comes to be read is itself complicated and problematic. Garbage cans, dumps and landfills become texts telling narratives of our own individual and society practices and identity (Hawkins 2). Part of this narrative though is the looming fact that our own garbage is catching up to us; and while all of these sociological or anthropological studies of garbage rest on the established knowledge that there is a global waste problem, this material problem remains an understated foundation. Garbage, in other words, is acknowledged as a problem but is immediately read as symbolic or symptomatic of something other than itself.

Even through the 1990's when environmentalism and climate change were well established, garbage often garnered more attention as an anthropological phenomenon than a tangible, global crisis; a hesitancy remained to fully acknowledge a self-made planetary threat. William Rathje and Cullen Murphy's archaeological study of garbage *Rubbish!* (1990) exhibits what in 2018 would be an alarmingly casual attitude toward

solving the garbage problem which “will cost money and make demands on our life-styles. But it will not cost all that much money or make all that many demands. In some respective the key is to remain calm. Our garbage is not about to overwhelm us; there are a number of options available; and most communities have time to think about those options and choose them wisely. The worst thing to do would be to blow the problem out of proportion, as if garbage were some meteor hurtling toward the planet” (238).

A few years into the new century, Gay Hawkins’ *The Ethics of Waste* (2005) sets out to study waste in part due to “a desire to understand how it might be possible to change ecologically destructive practices without recourse to guilt or moralism or despair” (ix). For all its meticulous study and analysis, this gingerly rhetoric still appears here and there; he is not interested in “familiar disenchantment stories” and at times only reminds us of the foundational danger in negated terms: “I don’t think anyone who has access to television or a newspaper or recycling bin needs to be reminded about the devastating effects of waste matter and of exploitative and wasteful economic practices on the planet” (viii). This rhetoric acknowledges the overwhelming consensus but nevertheless gently insists that the numerous threats of climate change are well-known and there’s no need to dwell on the issue or let ourselves feel negatively.

This discourse represents the common attitude toward garbage and the larger picture of global catastrophe, and the reasoning is rather insidious. “Since the 1970s predictions of an environmental apocalypse have abounded, but today’s supply of food, manufactured goods, fossil fuels and clean water seems to indicate that the natural world is just fine. This is because in the market economy deeper environmental destruction is kept hidden, cloaked by the commodity form” (Rogers 230). For all its ubiquitous

manifestations, so often garbage has remained a mere fixture in the background.

Paradoxically, this invisibility, both echoed by and battled through poetry of the twentieth century, is a hallmark of most garbage poetry.

Garbage Poetry

Amidst the general turn toward a poetry populated by the detritus of everyday life, it is possible to identify a specific tradition of modern and contemporary poems that explicitly take on the problem of thinking about and representing garbage. In many regards, this tradition resonates with canonical narratives of modernism and postmodernism. After all, the most famous poem of the twentieth century suggests with its very title that the modern world is an apocalyptic dump. The disorienting and shattered vision of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) has undoubtedly marked the frenetic distress of the twentieth century. Particularly critical of contemporary urban life, Eliot's portrait of the polluted Thames is emblematic of a greater, more insidious pollution of morality and spirituality which flows to the end of the century and beyond. Similarly, Charles Olson's "Kingfishers" (1949) describes a polluted landscape inhabited by bird eggs laid "not on bare clay, on bones thrown up in pellets by the birds. / On these rejectamenta... the young are born. / And as they are fed and grow, this / nest of excrement becomes / a dripping, fetid mass" (Olson 167). For such texts, it is impossible to talk about the crisis of modernity without invoking garbage. And yet, a poem like *The Waste Land* is arguably not that interested in waste, or rather, is interested in actual waste only to the degree that it can be seen as symbolizing some broader form of spiritual crisis or malaise.

This tendency to deploy garbage as a symbol of other ills rather than recognize it as a crisis in its own right is not simply a failure of the poets of the period. The loss of control or large-scale catastrophe we associate with modern-day garbage actually doesn't fit particularly well into this era. Without a global crisis to systematize its imminent danger, garbage becomes yet another thing to reflect on or grab our attention, fodder for a poet's abstract contemplation of self and society. Garbage poetry is, for much of the twentieth century, perhaps surprisingly defined by a distinctive Romantic subjectivity. It is worth noting, in this regard, that the garbage poetry tradition does not in fact begin with *The Waste Land* nor with any modern environmental spirit. Ecopoetry at its core explores the relationship between the poetic text and the natural environment and tends to be politically charged, seeking out useful or innovative responses to environmental disruptions or crises (Garrard 3-4).

Garbage poetry of the twentieth century by and large does neither of these things, and finds its roots elsewhere, arguably stretching back to a nineteenth-century precursor, a short poem by Walt Whitman entitled "This Compost" (1856). This poem shares a foundation with Eliot's "breeding / lilacs out of the dead land" but the longer Whitman's speaker dwells on the thought the closer he is to self-enlightenment and unity with the earth (Eliot 57). Long after Eliot's bleak vision garbage poetry and while sanitation science battled disease and civic unrest, garbage poetry upheld waste as a metaphorically rich subject matter, leaving its materiality in the shadows.

Garbage poetry cohabitated not only with neoromanticism but as already indicated with the mid-century gaze on the overflow of daily *things*. Jane Bennett's discussions of the *thing-power* of materials bring the two together in search of trash's

correlative value or integrity as an object. “The catalyst for Bennett’s enterprise was provoked by the power she recognized in trash...Even waste has thing-power in Bennett’s schema... ‘Inanimate things have a life of their own, that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other things. A kind of thing-power’” (Morrison 122). Like things, garbage bore the potential as a new avenue to explore and understand the modern world. But placing garbage under the microscope has also allowed it to be isolated from its critical mass, rendering it somewhat trivial— which is why even twenty-first century studies can still purport to “making sense of *waste beyond the trope of environmentalism*. My concern is with our most quotidian relations with waste, what they mean and how they might change” (Hawkins 3, emphasis mine). As environmentalism brings the damaged landscape into the foreground, garbage poetry struggles to effectively maintain a focus on the quotidian while sufficiently acknowledged this living, looming ecology.

In the twenty-first century, a new era comes crashing into the neoromantic appraisal of garbage and leaves little room for subordinating the trope of environmentalism. Up to this point we’ve been able to keep garbage and bay and expand the margins of waste beyond household, city and even national or continental borders, all the while maintaining its relative invisibility— the garbage industry after all was built on the ability to throw something away and make it disappear. But there are no more boundaries to expand beyond and no further space to expand them into; waste and its effects begin to flood frighteningly back on us (Strasser 7). This new era of frightening inevitability, the Anthropocene, describes the state of the planet in which humanity impacts the planet on an unprecedented geological scale— at our hands glaciers melt, sea

levels rise, shifting climates disrupt countless ecosystems. The cumulative effect of the most quotidian events becomes clearer; as Timothy Morton phrases it, when you “scale up these actions to include billions of [car] key turnings and billions of coal shovelings,” or discarding a piece of plastic a billion times, the damage caused to the planet is extremely disproportionate to each individual iteration (8). Furthermore, the damage done is difficult to grasp precisely because it takes place on such a massive scale. Essentially, one must start by weighing the significance of large and small scale geological changes over tens of thousands, sometimes millions, of years (Davies 19). The poetry dramatically shifts as a result.

The attention to the present-minded, dailyness is switched out for an immediacy of affect; the controlled tone that pervades the twentieth century is increasingly abandoned for an emotionally charged sense of urgency, desperation, anger, or disorientation. Juliana Spahr’s and Joshua Clover’s *#Misanthropocene: 24 Theses* exhibits this emphasis well:

First of all. Fuck all y’all... Seventh of all. The sheer scale of the misanthropocene. Our minds feel small and inert. Once every fragment seemed to bear within it the whole. Now the whole being too large for the mind to see stands before us always as a fragment. (Spahr and Clover 4)

This short text blends uninhibited ire (and humor) with the struggle to psychologically internalize something so counterintuitively vast and complex. The modernist sensibility of finding the whole in the fragment has been exhausted as the cumulative mass of all the fragments becomes a central concern. Difficulties aside, the ethical questions of addressing the problems encompassed by the Anthropocene are at their most pressing.

How do we read Mary Oliver's blissfully enchanting nature poems in the twenty-first century? If a text incorporates nature— or garbage, or things— to what degree does its author need to acknowledge and account for this era which we all share?

To a certain extent, my argument in the chapters that follow is that, for a certain strain of contemporary poets, understanding garbage has necessitated an attempt to resist poetry's strongly ingrained impulse to understand garbage as a symbol of something else in order to foreground its material existence. By choosing to focus the material presence of garbage as something continually made invisible, this dissertation does not attend as fully as it might to a myriad of other metaphorically possibilities for waste. Even for the garbage poets that it studies, waste of course functions in ways that represent many other kinds of anthropological, sociological, or philosophical problems. For the poets I discuss, garbage and waste in general absolutely can be seen to figure question about gender and marginalization. Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge* (2013) for example is a personal narrative framed in the language of recurring death and excess, a repeated killing or rebirthing of self in a world weighed down and threatened by its own trappings. Rather than exploring the clutter of contemporary living, Low's speaker continually loses vital pieces of herself— love, trauma— as though they were excessive, perhaps in order to maintain a sustainable self even if that self is full of holes. A good deal of the poem deals with uncomfortable, unsensational accounts of physical or psychological trauma in the routine encounters of a woman. On a visceral level, Susan Signe Morrison tells us that historically "though all bodies exude filth, women's bodies in particular have been identified with what is fluid and excess...The division of the body into clean and dirty collapses in misogyny, where women's bodies have no chance to be clean...women's

emissions have been viewed as problematic at least since Plato and Aristotle” (Morrison 63). Apart from the effect of waste on bodies, the associations and discriminations we’ve constructed around what our bodies themselves waste, particularly our gendered bodies, continues to be a profoundly rich direction of study.

Ammiel Alcalay similarly reclaims what has been deemed excessive and reframes it as essential. *Scrap Metal* (2007) performs a recuperation of an account of the Siege of Sarajevo which is rooted in lower class manual labor of odd jobs and scrap metal garbage. While so many poets write about salvaging culture or text, Alcalay’s text works to cultivate a newer, unseen history rather than perform a second-hand salvage operation. He sews together varying excerpts from his own life and from poetry, news ,and other media directly or indirectly pertaining to the French-Algerian War, in order to counter “scientific colonialism,” described as “a process whereby the center of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself” (Alcalay 45). His proliferation of scraps gestures toward a narrative forever incomplete but which must continually be made visible in order to decenter the hegemony of a fixed and limited history—and future. These are but a few texts briefly accounted for which gives us valuable and moving narratives from the boundaries of our culture which, like so much garbage, are all too invisible and speak to the gaping blind spots of our values.

This work focuses particularly on poetry that addresses material garbage, how the poems explore its newfound nuances and how they work to either draw attention to or, as in most cases, to hide material garbage. Discarded but not useless, wasted and out of sight but still vibrant, material garbage serves well as a metaphor for a host of pre- and post-environmental era ideation. This material garbage itself however remains suspended

between the foreground and the background, invited into the former but still pushed into the latter, flashing between visibility and invisibility.

I trace material garbage with a loose chronology from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day, following its journey through pre-environmental, post-environmental, and Anthropocentric cultural consciousnesses. Chapter 1 begins with Walt Whitman's mid-late nineteenth century poem, "This Compost," and from there I explore the ways in which early- and mid-century poets—Maxine Kumin, Richard Wilbur, and Wallace Stevens among others—invoke material waste and immediately depart from it, tapping into its metaphoric potential to explore other philosophies or just as often to bring us back into their own subjective mind. Even as these poets catalog items in a landfill or try to immerse themselves in a dump, discussions of garbage are notably tidy, relying on or ultimately deferring to a universal balance which entails cycles of death and renewal, decomposition and birth. Chapter 2 is dedicated solely to A.R. Ammons's book-length poem *Garbage* which I argue represents a critical change in cultural consciousness prior to and during the influence of scientific certainty regarding global climate change. *Garbage* is an extended reflection on material garbage and its relation to our society and our individual subjective identities; and unlike its predecessor's *Garbage* entails an open-ended investigation into the different questions and problems of garbage without moralization or proposition.

The poets of Chapter 3 bring with them Ammons's innovative spirit while consciously placing themselves in the Anthropocene, an era in which humans are damaging the planet to an unprecedented extent on an unprecedented scale; and in which the natural world and civilization are conceptualized not as a balance of two ecologies but

a single ecology being pulled dangerously in different directions. These poets work to confront the crises of their time directly, carving out a new rhetoric of planet-wide urgency with emotional turbulence, whether that be compassion or rage. Finally, Chapter 4 looks at the contributions of conceptual poetry to ecological concerns, particularly in the way they engage with the materiality of poetry itself in its printed and published manifestation. Conceptual poetry plays with the materiality of the printed text on the page; Kenneth Goldsmith offers his poetic projects of massive scale, some around nearing or exceeding 1000 pages, printing his work and admitting their unreadability, or even their need to be read— implicitly challenging their need to be printed.

While early and mid-twentieth century works are understandably the least aligned with present-day ecocritical concerns, texts spanning the century and up to the present day regardless of their agenda repeatedly face the particular challenge of keeping material garbage in the active foreground, and of determining their own accountability as they refine the poetic voice for the planet. Garbage and our methods of disposal tell us a good deal about ourselves, echoing among other things our runaway commodity culture. But studying the way we've written about garbage reveals something more profound— whether due to its massive scope as a problem, its astonishing deniability, or something else entirely, our discourse surrounding garbage so often un-reveals the garbage itself only to switch it out for something not unrelated but nevertheless incomplete. Critics and poets have used waste to tell us our own story. As ambivalence toward garbage and environmental concerns extend into our century, we need to learn how to tell the story of waste with a new focus and renewed vigor.

CHAPTER I: GARBAGE IN THE PASTORAL

What has been called American garbage poetry is not in fact poetry about garbage or its relationship to the natural environment, as critics and the poems themselves generally purport. While garbage poetry may intuitively seem to preface environmentalism or exist as a “distinct trend in environmental poetry,” this small body of texts does not put forward any core values of ecocriticism or ecopoetry (Anderson 38). Poetry composed prior to the rise of the modern environmental movement and before ecopoetry, beginning with Whitman at the close of the nineteenth century, has worked consistently if inadvertently to hide or veneer garbage, primarily by situating the poet-speaker in a Romantic relationship with their environment in which nature has been swapped out for waste as a means of anthropocentric contemplation and self-reflection. On top of that, the undefined terminology used to critically explore garbage poetry impedes a more nuanced understanding of how this poetics of garbage works. The poems often allude to a greater ecology or system, but by and large they assign and address accountability on the level of the individual.

The poets discussed in this chapter break ground in the newly sanctified subject matter— waste, in the broadest sense— but the treatment of *material* waste in these poems does not keep pace with tenets of the speed, excess, and disorientation of the new century. Rather, in an increasingly industrialized and mechanized world, with a dangerously accumulating output of material waste, these poets work to uncover the unseen positive potential of waste and waste aesthetics, and indeed draw their attention to

it— but ultimately treat it as more of a safe haven or aesthetic novelty than a burgeoning material problem of the new century.

The foundational instability or tension of garbage poetry is that poets readily find a place for waste in their work but welcome it as a sort of returned prodigal son, with a celebratory willingness to make it interesting and useful in spite of its past (and ongoing) transgressions. The persistent impulse in garbage poetry to transform and abstract material waste in order to proceed to some kind of agreeable resolution follows what Leo Bersani calls a “culture of redemption.” Bersani’s exploration of redemption in literature is not necessarily as literal as repurposing or resituating materials in order to counter their negative global ecological impacts, but his notion of redemption nevertheless highlights an underlying assumption in many of these poems— and having measurable, material stakes may make recognizing these self-reflexive redemptions all the more urgent. The culture of redemption hinges on the notion that “a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience. Experience may be overwhelming, practically impossible to absorb, but it is assumed... that the work of art has the authority to master the presumed *raw material of experience* in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that *material*...the catastrophes of history matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art, and art itself gets reduced to a kind of superior patching function” (1, emphasis mine). Or putting it simply, “Experience destroys; art restores” (14). While art isn’t simply a secondary reflection or representation of the world, questioning the assumption of its uniqueness or superiority can allow us to begin to investigate it as accountable to or a catalyst for the “real world” behavior and effects of the culture it works to redeem. If garbage poetry is going to offer

any redemption it needs to gain some authority over not just the raw material of experience but the raw material trashing the planet.

This culture of redemption entails the myth that art is “more real or more essential than life, that “the imaginary adheres to the real not in order to impart an existential authority or legitimacy to art, but instead to reproduce the real without any such authority, to demonstrate the superiority of the image to the model” (26). The redemption takes on a life of its own and slips into a corrective or substitutive function, potentially disconnecting from the “life” which has prompted it. Following this, the redemptive or “reparative” art proceeds to “repeat those catastrophes in order to transcend them, which means that they scrupulously reenact the failures they are meant to make not happen. The mood produced by this intended spectralization of pervasive personal and historical failures is one of noble and eloquent melancholy” (108). Applying this redemptive narrative to garbage poetry, the question remains to what extent these texts work to redeem— transform, re-cycle— garbage within themselves, or to what extent they reach beyond themselves back to their origin point: material garbage.

Bersani describes a tendency particularly strong in fiction like that of Proust or Joyce to “drea[m] of the erasure of history in art through a massive, encyclopedic, and transfiguring of history into the artist’s work.” These modernist projects “have little patience for structurally unassimilated or false starts. They seek to exclude the kind of repetition that makes visible within the work itself the actual process of working” (114). While no garbage poems in this chapter appear to work toward any degree of untouchably encyclopedic, we can still follow their tendency to hide their own loose ends

or incompleteness. Garbage poetry, in order to begin to be truly, materially redemptive, may need to exceed its own self-defined boundaries of redemption.

Redemption aside, garbage poetry is also faced a choice of timbre, which for much of the twentieth century is rather low-key. Bruno Latour's conception of friendly or malevolent monsters frames this important and inevitable aspect. In "Fifty Shades of Green," (2015) Latour addresses the notion of ecomodernism, which broadly speaking is an insistence that humans can undo environmental damage they've done primarily through technological advances; he describes this as a "strange animal" and "monster," a possible "allianc[e] between irreconcilable movements" (220). Taking on the metaphor of Frankenstein's creature, he asserts to follow his slogan— "love your monsters"— in order "to try to see if such an innovation can be made to behave properly" (220). Whether ecomodernist or not, garbage poetry has a similar conundrum as it works to connect accepting the monstrous amount of waste in the world and making it behave properly— as Latour puts it, discovering whether garbage is "a *white elephant* to kill as soon as possible, or a *hopeful monster* that requires the care of a whole bunch of Dr Frankensteins" (222). Following this distinction, garbage poetry shares with ecomodernism a simultaneous temptation toward and deliberate resistance of catastrophism— "I have heard many times the critique of catastrophism... "'Let's move away from the doomsday mood,'" as if catastrophism was a sort of human ideology imposed on a situation that would remain, in itself, fairly quiet and stable" (223). Garbage poetry too must decide what to do with calm optimism and with urgency, both of which run through the texts, to discover how the narratives of garbage poetry fit not simply into human civilization but into the "geostory" (222).

Determining how garbage poetry might be telling a/the geostory, we can hook it into texts and ideas already working to do just this. Garrard's catalogue of the development of the term "ecocriticism," while not strictly regarding poetry, establishes a few basic tenets. At its most basic level ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment," taking an "earth-centered approach to literary studies." More specifically but in the same vein, "[t]he ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations... to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis." In *Ecopoetry* (2002) J. Scott Bryson begins by defining ecopoetry broadly as "adhering to certain Romantic traditions, but also taking on distinctly contemporary problems and issues" (5). Predecessors to American ecopoetry include nineteenth century nature writers for whom writing had become a more "consciously rhetorical act, whose purpose is social change" (7).

American garbage poetry has not emphasized change or waste's relationship with the environment even in a broad sense, but instead has promoted a continuity of subject and state of mind in spite of any contemporary changes. The only real attribute that these garbage poems share with ecopoetry is the adherence to Romanticism. The subject matter is new as well as the impulse to sanctify it, but this poetry has not yet entirely figured out how to differently engage with it in a way that resonates with the contemporary world.

To be sure, garbage poetry does not need ecocriticism or environmentalism to legitimate it. As he gathers his small canon of garbage poems, Anderson writes that his "purpose is to...make the case that [garbage poems] form a small but distinct trend in

environmental poetry.” I take this moment as an opportunity to make the distinction that garbage poetry might well be more of a trend outside of environmental poetry, or alongside it at best but not necessarily joining in any authoritative manner. Anderson suggests that these early- and mid- century garbage poems demonstrate environmentalist tendencies before environmentalism became a widespread and concrete concept. While this intuitively makes sense, these poems which perform compost aesthetics on noncompostable subject matter arguably work directly against environmentalist interests.

Tying in with environmentalist efforts, cultural and literary studies of waste also emphasize its role as prompting the reader to some form of action. John Shoptaw’s 2016 article discusses more rigorously the aesthetics and evaluations of ecopoetry, and he emphasizes that ecopoetry necessarily brings action, that it “has designs on us, that imagines changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and act in the world” (7). Garbage poetry supposedly works to the same end. In her book on waste literature Susan Signe Morrison asserts that, “[n]ot always negatively charged, waste contains the potential to *charge*, catalyzing ethical behavior and profound insights, even compassion” (3). Similarly, Hawkins asserts that “a lot can happen when waste is noticed, and thinking about the effects of the acute attention waste can sometimes provoke is another aim of this book” (3). He further states succinctly that “[w]aste rather than nature is the new motivation for action.”

While it is impossible to refute that these poems have caused any change in thought or behavior, the Romantically cyclical and subject-centered modus operandi of garbage poetry has created space for a figure immersed in both nature and garbage, searching for different echoes of their own voice and for contrasts to further self-

understanding. These poems don't emphasize change in either the subject or the environment— except for changing one's mind about garbage, which often counters ecopoetics— nor do they raise awareness or bring anything new to the relationship between us, materiality and the environment or ecosystems. Their subject matter is ostensibly concrete, but these texts operate primarily in ideas— they don't in any direct way urge new action or new thought. They don't catalyze but rather calm.

Without placing undue emphasis on terminology, I believe having a vocabulary specifically addressing material garbage in poetry may help determine how and to what extent it is treated. The term “garbage poetry” has been used by critics loosely enough that it becomes difficult to pinpoint its characteristics as a distinct trend or subset of American poetry. The word “garbage” alone itself has a great deal of slippage in critics' vocabulary. Susan Signe Morrison's *The Literature of Waste* (2015) offers a massive conceptual and temporal scope, introducing the subject of waste as “present in cultural artifacts, ha[ving] been a concern of the Western canon since its inception” and present in “virtually every piece of literature...depending upon one's definition” (4-5). Spanning the history of the English language, “[w]aste has meant desolation, pointlessness, and uselessness, but also excess and surplus; both extremes have been viewed as problematic, void of meaning, and immoral” (8). With such a broad scope, Morrison warns that “one must be wary of making equivalencies about waste between the medieval period, say, and the twenty-first century. Waste is contextually, historically, and culturally specific” (8). I would argue too that explicitly drawing distinctions is just as important, not only across time and civilizations but between different uses of the terms.

Waste studies becomes a term predominantly reserved for or geared toward the nonmaterial; and for Morrison, it becomes necessary metaphoric.

Like other critics and poets alike, Morrison works toward a conception and utility of waste that avoids blatant villanization, or really any villanization whatsoever. “Western culture has long denied waste or marked it as ‘other’” and throughout her study she argues for recognizing and reinforcing our affinity with waste (9). Not simply as something we have neglected or as something we are indeed a part of, but waste as something with the Levinasian face of the other in need of our compassion. “How could waste literature help compassion?... [It] is not a genre; rather it is a literature that takes our blinders off to take in the layers of our world...Waste allows us to see the fundamental similarity among us all, just as metaphor or simile allows us to see the affinity between two things or states of being not preciously perceived. In this way, waste is inherently metaphorical” (175-6).

The insistence on waste as necessarily metaphorical is a thread running through her book. “Metaphor allows waste to take on different properties and functions, including helping to bridge the gap between ourselves and the otherness of waste; “[w]hile the metaphor of waste has often been used for destructive purposes, the articulation of a waste aesthetics can reveal the humanity we share... The poethics of metaphor transforms disgust into compassion” (13). If waste is inherently metaphoric, we can work to shift the metaphor to something we have compassion for and affinity with, something recognizable that we care about in an immediate sense. “What happens when we *do* name? How can we name ethically? Metaphor opens us to ethical understanding,” an understanding that requires us to bring waste from the ether of periphery and neglect

(173). Metaphor runs through waste entirely as a means of also addressing actual garbage; “The materiality of waste— as in landfills, trash cans, garbage dumps, and compost piles— inevitably becomes metaphoric. Metaphor necessarily dyes our discussion. Codification demands that we ‘trash’ certain items to create order. When categorization fails, we become filled with a nameless dread” (11). Metaphor allows us not only to shift our perspective away from simply villainizing or turning our backs on waste— it allows us to even begin to turn toward it and approach. Literal dumps, trash heaps, or trash cans also metaphorically shape our relationship to waste, which “cannot be easily limited, hence the desire to restrict it, such as in a container... signified as a waste can” (82). Physically separating waste from ourselves results in, or coincides with, putting it out of our mind as well, removing it from the fabric of our civilization. We need to find a way to psychologically, culturally, and literally welcome waste back into our lives.

With the extensive power she assigns to waste metaphor, Morrison is careful not to disconnect entirely. “We must not romanticize the life of slum-dwelling recyclers... Payatas, on the outskirts of Manila, is “said to support up to 100,000 people, about one-fifth of whom actually live in shacks built on the garbage. Some of these unfortunates... continue to die periodically in landslides of rubbish.” (81-2) While I don’t believe Morrison romanticizes waste scenarios of such dire straits, neither does her study incorporate them or explicitly address how Vibrant materialism might function or help here. “Recovery lies in the discovery of the vibrancy of objects, including waste, trash, garbage, and rubbish... Acknowledging the dynamic agency of Vibrant materialism and ecomaterialism allow us to recover the worth in stuff, objects, and things” (12). On the

global scale, this is the tallest of orders, and Payatas is an instance where waste *has* been reincorporated into civilization but certainly not to the benefit of its inhabitants; the recovery here is a recovery *of* waste while arguably a recovery *from* waste, from the waste(d) system that lead to these garbage slums in the first place, might be more comprehensive or necessary.

Morrison certainly doesn't neglect a systemic approach; throughout her study, she continually emphasizes a nonanthropocentric approach to waste that begins with overcoming our initial disgust with it, and how literature of waste works toward this. Her closing lines exemplify this: "Writings are the rubbish heap or composted waste of the mind. The poet mosaics together shards, recycles litter, and salvages fragments. The poet is a garbage collector, a detritus gatherer, a waste gourmet...A gleaner, the poet delicately cradles each morsel hidden in the rubbish tip like a gleaming jewel" (199). What is subordinated in this welcoming and nonanthropocentric approach, however, is the huge, material and ecological cost not only of vilifying garbage but of welcoming it too. A shift in perception is surely a good start, but we might move more quickly from nonanthropocentric & garbage-centered to a *geocentric* framework. While reorienting the mental and physical spaces of civilization to reconsider waste is no small task, anthropocentrism still lingers in the air while the narrative of the world at large, the geostory, does not share the same privileges.

Within the massive scope of Morrison's waste studies some critics identify garbage poetry itself specifically as their playground. Gyorgyi Voros focuses on manifestations of the dump in Ammons and Stevens, laying a groundwork of waste which "takes on specific significance for post-World War II American consumer culture,

whose garbage, both because of sheer volume and because of its unbiodegradability, threatens altogether to clog both the physical and metaphysical cycles of degeneration and renewal” (162-3). The historical backdrop for her analysis is fairly concrete and material-oriented, although the mention of “metaphysical cycles” prefaces his move into the abstract. “Trash, whether it be material or ideational, is what is left over, what can no longer be used, what has achieved that state of decay that precedes regeneration in the cycles of creation and destruction” (162). Trash becomes simultaneously more pervasive and amorphous, and the discussion drifts away from the heavy price of contemporary consumer culture to universal, cyclical abstractions.

Pondering Stevens’s dump, she unites “trash” and “poetry,” writing that “the dump disposes of hierarchy, among other things, even to the extent of including nature’s waste along with that of human, cultural waste” (168). As for Ammons, Voros’ reading of *Garbage* encompasses “all manner of excess and redundancy, from the natural to the social to the linguistic,” and in the same spirit concludes that both poets “take as their themes the same possibility for resacrilizing trash as the necessary prelude to rebirth and regeneration” (169, 174). In both cases, the dumps over which the two poems’ speakers preside over quickly transcend— or perhaps more accurately, abandon— their material presences and transform them into metaphors for excesses of all sorts and for larger cyclical systems at work in the world.

Finally, in Christopher Todd Anderson’s “Sacred Waste: Ecology, Spirit, and the American Garbage Poem” (2010) the need for precise and distinct terms becomes evident— partly because, as his title suggests, the term “garbage” takes precedence. Anderson begins to parse different categories of waste, as “the placement of waste

symbolizes the marginal status of garbage both as a material substance and as a concept” (35). He emphasizes the physical existence and placement of garbage, as indicated by his work to “make the case that such texts form a small but distinct trend in American environmental poetry” and by “examining these poems within the context of environmental thought” (38). His article however focuses largely on garbage in the conceptual or abstract.

Like Morrison, he recognizes that we “place our dumps near enough to allow for convenient use, but far enough away that we avoid their repugnant qualities,” and this designation immediately becomes a metaphor “symboliz[ing] the marginal status of garbage both as a material substance and as a concept” (35). And again, like Morrison, Anderson seeks a sort of affinity with waste or repositioning our relationship with it. “What exactly is it, after all, that distinguishes waste from that which is beautiful or useful...[l]ike the ecosystems of marginal spaces, garbage offers rich opportunities for study” (36). The prosaic yet important answer which I subscribe to is, that which substantially hinders local or global ecologies. Anderson maintains a metaphoric approach, which inevitable broadens the definition of waste. “Garbage is interpreted diversely in these texts, variously *representing* a threat of environmental harm... the wastefulness of American consumerism... a wide-ranging record of tastes, trends, and cultural habits” (37, emphasis mine). Garbage can represent a number of different cultural behaviors or events, but garbage doesn’t simply represent but rather *is* an environmental threat. This perhaps negligible semantic occurrence nevertheless shows how easily material garbage is hidden, purposefully or not, behind the vast array of symbolic and metaphorical garbage.

The metaphoric approach also tends to lean toward more anthropocentric readings and conclusions; “How we think about various kinds of waste... raises fundamental questions about how we understand ourselves and our place in the natural world” (36). As with Morrison’s waste literature at large, Anderson’s focal point of garbage poetry pushes the boundaries of a human-centered world, perhaps, but does not move away from it. The “natural world,” after all, is by definition constructed as what isn’t human civilization; we might rather look for our place in— or better yet, look at our *effects on*— global or local ecologies.

What unites his small canon of American garbage poems is that they “display a kind of neo-Romantic anti-Romanticism, expressing a sense of transcendent awe through repugnant images that depart from those of conventional Romanticism” (50). Garbage rather than nature becomes a means of transcendence; these poets “recognize beauty” in the “lowly” which allows them to transform something repugnant into something redeemed. Latour asserts that “there is not one single case where it is useful to make the distinction between what is ‘natural’ and what ‘is not natural,’” and defines nature as “but a name for excess” (221). Garbage too becomes a construction of excess where the distinctions between garbage and not-garbage are continually blurred and entangled. The world of contemporary garbage “becomes a quasi-mystical territory in which the poet can enact a fantasy of regeneration” with “a hope that nature has the power to redeem even our grossest examples of wastefulness and neglect” (54). Anderson does acknowledge that this transformation is in fact largely fantasy, and this is where the tense ambiguity of what garbage actually is at a foundational level comes to a breaking point.

Anderson also explains that “the kind of ecological transformation” these garbage poets explore “is mostly a myth when it comes to American dumps...[where] little biodegradation takes place in modern landfills due to the compaction of waste and the resulting lack of oxygen to facilitate composting” (43). Even though he assumes everything in a landfill *could* decompose, he nevertheless creates space between the conceptual transfiguration of garbage and the physical situation of garbage. He notes immediately after however that “the trope of beneficial natural processes purifying and transforming trash is a powerful one” and that “garbage poetry represent[s] attempts to piece together the fragments of our refuse in a way that reveals truths about human culture and the biosphere” (43). Beyond the assumptions of the transformative landfill, garbage, trash and refuse are bizarrely treated as natural and compostable. The question of how to physically “transfor[m] *trash*” rather than organic compost becomes necessary, as do definitions to distinguish, primarily, waste, garbage, and compost.

The term *garbage poetry* has been used loosely in reference to poetry about any sort of material or abstract garbage, waste, or even excesses or remainders. Providing distinctions within this definition may, at best, serve to draw attention to particular aspects and *keep* attention on them—in this case, material garbage. For clarity, I define *garbage poetry* as poems which work to draw attention to or raise visibility of material garbage or pollution that exists all over the planet. *Compost poetry* draws on the decomposable or recyclable, whether biological or synthetic, as part of a cycle of renewal (albeit an imbalanced one) which materially exists. *Waste poetry*, in turn, works as an overarching category for any type or usage of literal or figurative waste—including, or not, garbage or compost. While these definitions are fairly simple poetic discourse

surrounding them has mashed them together. Garbage poetry by the end of this study becomes a moot or dismantled idea, but for now serves its purpose.

Walt Whitman's "This Compost" is considered a seminal text for eco or garbage poetry. The importance of this poem is that Whitman "addresses spring and herbs, feeling disgust from the uncanny sense that the dead lie buried beneath the beauty" after which "the speaker marvels at the 'chemistry' that allows for the mixture of death and life" (Morrison 195). The sublime in nature is placed right beneath our feet, and not as something grand and looming but as something physically disgusting— and on top of that, directly connected to us, inviting us to recognize our place with it. Whitman is an ideal read for Morrison's conception of waste literature— in giving waste his attention he overcomes his disgusts, then recognizes and embraces his affinity with it. By addressing the metaphoric-material entanglement of waste he changes his perception from a simplified negative to a more nuanced positive one.

Whitman confronts "a repulsive waste object that is initially shunned, then revealed to be the site of ecological transformation...[he] anticipates the kind of questions that have been asked more recently about how American society should deal with garbage that, because of its sheer quantity, both fascinates and repels us" (Anderson 38). With his praise for the physically repulsive and recognition of its centrality, Whitman becomes an origin point for contemporary garbage poetry. But while he asks some generally relevant anticipatory questions in the first section of his poem, he answers them rather conclusively in the second section, and in doing so separates them sharply from the contemporary problem of material garbage.

The poem opens with a jarred speaker where “[s]omething startles me where I thought I was safest,” a something that causes the speaker to recoil from the nature in which he has always trusted in and revelled; he is compelled to “withdraw from the still woods I loved,” or keep his body clothed and refuse to “meet my lover the sea.” This *something* is death, and not the fact of death in any existential sense but the realization of the physical aftermath of a human’s mortality, of a decomposing body. The speaker is fraught, asking “O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken?” or how, with the accumulation of corpses over time, isn’t “every continent work’d over and over with sour dead?” Following this series of harrowing questions, he realizes that “I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv’d” and is determined to dig into the earth to explore the situation of this foulness.

This first section expresses a realization of a disturbed and unfamiliar natural world, and a concern that the earth itself is somehow sick, that it has reached a point of no return. It further identifies a concern with the invisibility of this poisoning, and a sense of being deceived by the very ground and grass the speaker used to revel in. These concerns are sufficiently anticipatory, if broadly so, to our current garbage problem, but the second section of the poem neatly resolves the disturbances of the first.

In a familiar Whitmanesque catalogue, the speaker praises the “grass of spring,” “applebuds,” “potato’s dark green leaves” and so on, all of which are “innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.” He then praises the “chemistry” which he found so alarming in the first section and declares that “this is no cheat / this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me” which “is safe” and “will not endanger me.” This section is a reversal of the first followed by a re-embracing of the

earth and its death-rebirth cycle; but moreso, the speaker insists on the transparency of the earth's processes, that it is "honest" and "stainless," the waters "clean forever and forever." It is a curious over-compensation for his concern in the first section, a sort of apology for his efforts to expose the hidden scandal of death beneath the earth's surface.

While I consider this turn of passionate bolstering appropriate for Whitman and his exploration of actual compost, the tidiness and the transparency of "This Compost" is carried forward into other waste poetry to which it is not suitable. As its title indicates Whitman's poem has little to do with the contemporary American problem of material waste due to one seemingly simple key difference: in short, compost is physically transformed, and garbage is not. These terms may be fairly interchangeable in conversation or even in the poems themselves, but critically we need a precise vocabulary. Allowing all of the different terms— waste, garbage, trash, compost, and so on— to be more or less synonymous has allowed abstractions of garbage and their metaphorical counterparts to overshadow the actual material waste.

For instance, writing about "This Compost," Anderson refers to Whitman's subject matter as both "garbage" and "the composted corpse," a conflation that is not so much neglected but rather merely not his point (38). Nevertheless, on a grander global and temporal scale, a human body and, say, a hunk of plastic have dramatically different endings, for themselves and their environment. Anderson however uses Whitman to bring relevant and counterintuitive Romanticism into the twentieth century, one that puts the sublime right beneath our feet, finding wonder, solace and terror in nature's cycle of death and rebirth. Garbage essentially becomes the new nature for the poet, a new site for

redemption, a garbage-scape which the poet is not only immersed in but literally a part of, collapsing the space between the subject and object.

This conflation however is worth parsing out, and again the reason for any terminological distinction is to recognize and separate the distinct materiality of some waste and in doing so study how it is, or isn't, present in poetry. For Anderson, American garbage poetry is perhaps more akin to Morrison's waste studies, encompassing garbage, compost, and anything in the vicinity. This does not undermine any of his analytical work but instead makes room for my own argument to pinpoint and expound on *garbage* poetry as distinct from waste and compost. Whitman's poem does identify a pillar of my overarching definition and argument for garbage poetry, this sense of hiddenness and alarming proximity— but as I will demonstrate, early and mid-twentieth century poems considered to be garbage poems resonate very little with any contemporary material *garbage* problem.

These poems take on the subject matter of pollution and material waste, but the philosophy or ontology within the poems is either one of literal cyclical composting or a metaphorical transfiguration of material garbage by means of the poem itself. Morrison may work to see the positive potential of waste and Voros may work the poems to “resacriliz[e] trash” as a concept or category, but the materiality of this garbage remains to be addressed. The language of waste enables critics to perform this redemptive or resacrilizing operation— or the illusion of it anyway— simply by allowing waste, garbage, compost, trash all to function primarily as conceptual and therefore be subject to what Morrison calls *compost aesthetics*, which “reads poetry that acknowledges the *poignancy* of materiality” (13, emphasis mine). Importantly, the effect or impression or

attributes of materiality, not the materiality itself, is acknowledged. Subtly, compost aesthetics only acknowledges a certain kind of materiality— the compostable kind, and the left is left behind to remain behind, hidden, static. Something we might call a garbage aesthetics could have the potential to acknowledge the stagnation of materiality, the material remainder. Reading these poems with materiality as the privileged element works to shed light on the hidden or absent garbage.

“I do not see any of it, perhaps I am deceiv’d” speaks on behalf of garbage and waste poetry prior to (and even during) environmentalism, in a sort of reverse revelation of “This Compost.” Whitman’s speaker thinks initially that nature in spite of its beauty and splendor is hiding something insidious and poisonous— but he concludes that this poison, the rotting death of organic bodies, is not poison but fertilizer and that this system is pure and transparent. He is not in fact deceived, but reading what has been called garbage poetry as confronting the contemporary situations of material waste is deceptively neat, hiding the poison not in the earth but in the poem.

I don’t argue Whitman has somehow missed the mark, given that he obviously did not set out to draw attention to twentieth century industrial and consumer garbage problems. Whitman in fact is one of the few poets who is actually spot on about their subject matter: it has, will and always will decompose, because he's not talking about material garbage, he's talking about organic human bodies. But his confined compost system does not translate well into other garbage poems in which, as I will demonstrate, I do not see any garbage. The phrase “garbage poetry,” and even the subject of matter of garbage within these poems, ultimately hides or draws attention away from the material garbage that inspired them in the first place.

While garbage poetry works to establish an affinity with its previously underappreciated subject matter, two trends run through these texts which undercut this affinity: how garbage is actually hidden, and the way in which the poet's role has been defined. Maxine Kumin's "The Brown Mountain" follows "This Compost" as a more contemporary and more graphic praise for the graphic cycle of death and rebirth that humankind and nature share. While Anderson puts "[a]nimal manure and human rubbish" in the same category, it works here because in Kumin's poem, everything *is* compostable, "in an homage to the transformative power of composting...the pile's heat purifies and makes useful even the most revolting substances" (47). Unlike Whitman, Kumin is not startled or disturbed by the foulness so close to the surface of the earth, and piled on top of the earth for that matter. She takes it all in stride, beginning where Whitman's poem ends: "What dies out of us and our creatures, / out of our fields and gardens, / comes slowly back to improve us," and she unflinchingly spends most of the poem cataloging "our splatterings and embarrassments — / cat vomit, macerated mice, / rotten squash, burst berries, / a mare's placenta" under the simple aphorism that whether "Compost is our future," whether you are "commoner or king."

This is a natural extension of Whitman's poem: it champions fundamentally the same natural cycle, only without the emotional turbulence, without the disgust even as it lists arguably more disgusting items. Which is strange given that Kumin works with explicitly rotting, terranean materials and not the mere idea that the dirt was once life. It's noteworthy that the presence of this waste no longer surprises or revolts. Like Whitman, Kumin's speaker is not an active facilitator or enabler for this process but instead a keen observer and reporter. Kumin's poem does however bring in something massive and new:

civilization. The speaker of “This Compost” primarily reflects on the emotional processes and realizations of the individual, and humankind’s surprisingly close relationship with the dirt of the earth. The items that decompose here are plants and animals and their byproducts, and of course the human organism. Kumin brings in the “castoffs” of the domestic scene like coffee grounds, egg shells and cat vomit, all of which are as natural so to speak as the rest, or take part in the exact same biological cycle, but their sourcing and situation is fundamentally different. Coffee grounds and cat vomit come from a household and are excesses, not simply part of the natural cycle; while the poem maintains equilibrium, there is a sense of tipping scales as this mountain of excess accumulates visibly on the surface whereas Whitman’s compost lies below. As a result Kumin’s poem produces a subtle fear that is absent from Whitman’s poem; even though his fear is made quite plain, it is convincingly resolved. “Brown Mountain” presents an emotionally hidden speaker who, in offering up this excess, also implicitly offers up the possibility that this excess will remain, and increase, undigested.

Interestingly, compost is not the present but the future, and we can see this in the undigested pile of lines she gives us—as an itemized list it isn’t compost yet, isn’t yet a brown mountain. At its most incisive potential, “Brown Mountain” could serve as a critique of the city on a hill that remains forever in the future, but this is perhaps more the will of the garbage reader than the work of the poem. The concluding notion that “Dirt [is] fit / for the gardens of commoner and king” comes off as awfully idealistic, as though death can somehow work as the great leveler *before* we die; and while this idealism could be purposefully overstated, this seems unfitting giving the earnestness of the poem in its entirety. Perhaps as a conditional statement, “compost is our future” rings true.

Kumin inverts the visible from “This Compost”— for her, emotion is hidden and waste visible, for Whitman the opposite— but nevertheless the cyclical mechanism is identical. Kumin’s revelry in the same death and rebirth via decomposition that Whitman put forward brings the matter into the contemporary home, and while there is some wiggle room for ambiguities, on the whole we are given the same full circle closure. “The Brown Mountain” follows Whitman’s sentiments, it praises compostable materials literally and philosophically, there is no inherent contradiction here or between this. However, the *garbage poem* label doesn’t fit, and not only that, this label becomes dangerously inaccurate as we move through other garbage poems that become increasingly self-contradictory in a way that I don’t believe is critically productive.

Howard Nemerov’s “The Town Dump” portrays a similar wastescape as Kumin but in this poem the problems of the label “garbage poetry” and the problems of the poems themselves emerge. Like Kumin he searches for redemption in his catalogue of the discarded, projecting onto this heap a sacred banality, and praises the never ending cycle of balanced death and rebirth. There is a fundamental difference between this works however: Nemerov keeps the compost aesthetics but brings garbage into his catalogue and with it a tension that I argue is unresolvable.

Nemerov’s praise is less straightforward although he provides a possible reading guide: ““The art of our necessities is strange / That can make vile things precious.” Unlike the previous poets Nemerov turns to the sources of this waste, which is civilization broadly speaking; and amidst compostables like “[e]ggshells and mouldy bread, banana peels” he finds discarded or lost humanmade treasures. His poem insists that, although it is rare, “in any sty / Someone’s heaven may open and shower down /

Riches responsive to the right dream.” He brings garbage to the compost heap, and with it a salvage operation wherein the “hunters by night” rescue the treasure “each day wastes.” Compost aesthetics take on a grittier veneer; Nemerov doesn’t have the suburban admiration of Kumin’s “Brown Mountain” but instead emphasizes “purefying fires” and “wild birds, drawn to the carrion and flies” whose wings are “[s]hining with light, their flight enviably free, / Their music marvelous, though sad, and strange.” The system is dirty, rough around the edges, but the cycle is there; everything— human civilization, organic matter, inorganic matter, the natural ecosystem in which the dump resides— plays a part.

What’s missing is the material remainder, all of the accumulating unsalvaged garbage. Anderson describes the “wild birds, drawn to the carrion and flies” in the poem’s closing as divine, but they also work as a preoccupation rather than the point; the poem ends with this distraction, by moving up and out of the garbage to the divinity swarming it, and the garbage is finally hidden. These birds with shining light, enviable flight, and emotionally nuanced music, appear to draw on this life-sustaining town dump— they remind us of the curious pure necessity that we can recognize in something as base as a dump. The dump is another equal body in an ecology, sustaining flies, carrion, and treasure seekers. The initial description of the dump is telling: it is a “mile out in the marshes” and a “city which reflects ours.” This anthropocentric conception of the dump gives no indication that it is intruding on the natural world. Nemerov cleverly has it both ways: he reflects on the dump from a distance, and yet it is also the city we are immersed in.

What we have in the end is Narcissus staring into the reflecting dump

from which any material remainder has been removed. The poem isn't about a dump or garbage as such but about how we can re-see and reinvent this marginalized mess and see ourselves in a byproduct of our civilization. But we don't come back to the material; we rise about up and out of the dump, eyes turned towards the birds and the sky. The material garbage has no place in this perfect system so it is simply left out.

Richard Wilbur's "Junk" centers around on the human factor, although not so much to incite accountability but more to wag his finger at the contents of his neighbor's trash can. "The heart winces" for the junk on the curb still full of potential, the "jerrybuilt things" and also, perhaps more so, for "the men who make them." The poem has a peculiar insistence on the integrity of the discarded items; the axe handle is "hell's handiwork / the wood not hickory / The flow of grain / not faithfully followed." Lying in the dump, this tragic junk has nevertheless "kept composure, / like captives who would not / Talk under torture." Morrison asserts that "[b]y civil engagement with things, we are no longer separated from them," that by claiming our affinity with these discarded things we can learn adjust our thinking and behavior (126). In line with that, the crafters of these neglected items are invariably humble artisans making "little money" and "bartering pride" as they create substandard items to get by— they, like the items, are unable to fulfill their potential.

In the poem's second half Wilbur gives us a familiar scene at the dump in which all of these indignant items "shall waste in the weather / toward what they were... And the blistering paint / peel off in patches, / That the good grain / be discovered again." Again the compost cycle is Romantically applied to noncompostable materials, and although here there is a return rather than a renewal, the sentiment of infeasible nostalgia

remains effectively the same. Additionally, unlike a “natural” renewal, a discovery requires a human agent who is notably absent here. Wilbur seems to be counting on a change of heart of those who discard this stuff in the first place, or on some sort of subculture of non-wasting humans to come out of the woodwork and to the rescue. Civil engagement here doesn’t appear to make space for much more wishful thinking.

The invisibility of garbage becomes pointedly apparent with the painted wood grain Wilbur describes. With a sense of purity and relief, we are led to anticipate seeing the “good grain” underneath once the paint has peeled off. But where does the paint go, what ecology does it invade— what is *its* curbside, as it were? The paint flakes disappear from the poem as the junk descends into its burial, a disappearance which suggests the neglect of what is hiding in plain sight, what would spoil the nostalgia. As miniscule as the paint flakes may seem, they are the material remainder which has remained hidden or covered in works that seemingly engage with the neglected waste of civilization. They also indicate that there is no underlying system suggested in this poem for the epidemic of garbage; citing only an isolated incident— one conveniently close no less— makes it difficult to interpret this anecdote as more than one of many similar bad habits or individual acts rather than a symptom of something more insidious. If Wilbur concerns himself with any system here it is an economic one which has pitted the artisan as laborer against himself as an artist.

The mourning of a lost, better time or sentiment of returning to what once was is reinforced by the poem’s mythology and Old English meter. The epigraph to “Junk” according to Wilbur’s endnote is from Anglo-Saxon poet Waldere and translates as, “Truly, Wayland’s handiwork— the word Mimming which he made— will never fail any

man who knows how to use it bravely.” Invoking Old English masculine values of personal worth, honor and bravery further suggest an individualistic rather than system problem. Wayland, an ancient pagan European mythical blacksmith-god, closes the poem alongside Hephaestus, the immortal blacksmith for the Greek gods whose character is not unlike the underappreciated artisans. Edith Hamilton’s *Mythologies* describes him as “a kindly, peace-loving god, popular on earth as in heaven,” a “parton of handicrafts, the arts which along with agriculture are the support of civilization” (37). These two have halted their work, suggesting that either no one is worthy or brave enough to properly wield their creations, or perhaps that creations of their caliber no longer exist.

Hephaestus’ direct ties to agriculture and civilization suggest that this halting is more than a peripheral concern— nevertheless, the 2-part stanzas maintain their balance, suggesting a continued rhythm of the blacksmith’s hammer in spite of their rest or simply a broader, overarching balance. Arguably, bringing the old gods into the present intact depicts a more stable world overall. Again, the system— the lore, the potential for individual redemption— remains untouched, sullied only by failings of the individual. The subterranean stillness of these benevolent blacksmiths harks back to Bersani’s notion of a noble reenactment of civilizations failure as a means for reparation or redemption. While the cessation of the blacksmiths could in the world translate to ecological catastrophe, this ending even remains dignified, “sensual and elegaic” (Morrison 127)

Wallace Stevens’s “Man on the Dump” verges on an awareness of its own disconnection from material waste. “The dump / is full of images” first and foremost, the speaker tells us as the poem opens. Not objects or neglected treasures but something intangible and heady. We know already the speaker is focused not on what exactly he

presides over but what he can do with it. Since “[t]he freshness of night has been fresh a long time,” the poet looks for something new, something fresh, even if it isn’t fresh as such: “how many men have copied dew... / With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads / Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.” Satirizing traditional appreciation of beauty in nature, Stevens clearly isn’t looking for immersion in something traditional or even beautiful; after all, “One grows to hate these things except on the dump.” Only when he’s steeped in contrast does the poet appreciate, or learn to re-appreciate, this traditional beauty.

Between that disgust and this, between the things
That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
One feels the purifying change. One rejects
The trash.

In addition to this rediscovered appreciation— earnest even amidst the slight cheekiness of “azaleas and so on”)— the poet values a transformative experience and shifting perspective as well. His rejection of trash is more a moment in which he comes back to what he was trying to avoid in the first place: all the dewy dew, the azaleas and so on. He not only rejects the trash over which he resides but the trash of Romantic embellishment; afterward, “Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon... and you see / As a man (not like an image of a man).” The purifying process is not so much for the dump but for the man’s poetic perceptions and for the poem itself. He sheds (trashes) the overly lavish dewy language in order to see and describe the dew right out. Nothing actually changes or transforms save for the poet’s own mind. “One sits and beats an old tin can,

lard pail. / One beats and beats for that which one believes. / That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all / Be merely oneself." For all its playful mockery and pursuit of novelty, the man on the dump ultimately strives to be a Romantic again, to immerse himself so wholly until he comes out on top, thinking primarily of his own self. "Man on the Dump" is arguable the most transparent garbage poem in terms of using garbage as a sounding board for self-contemplation. "Given the tranquil lucidity of vision the man on the dump experiences after his act of shedding, why, then, is the poem's final stanza fraught with insistent, even tortured questions?" I would like the answer to this question to be, because the poet knows, consciously or subconsciously, that he *cannot* recompose the matter of civilization. But of course it has something to do with the man's inability to grasp or separate *the* truth.

"On the dump, the place of decontextualized objects and artifacts, the poet is charged with recomposing the decomposing matter of civilization, in the process making for himself a dwelling place and a memorial" (165). Given the speaker's conscious ambivalence toward nature, describing garbage as "decontextualized" seems a massive oversight; it is rather *recontextualized*, moved into the world of genuine and kitschy beauty he contemplates so much. But this very mechanic is what makes the poem work, what allows the speaker to create something "for himself," and only himself. Only without a context, in some sort of placeless limbo, can garbage serve as a means of reflection; were the poet to give the garbage a new context— its actual context— he might be obliged to address that massive issue instead.

Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" serves as a garbage poem which, in a reversal of "Man on the Dump," gives us a synthetic, human-made object placed deliberately in the

wilderness which stands in for civilization. Shoptaw discusses Anecdote of the Jar as anthropocentric in which nature gathers around garbage, either from the perspective of the viewer or literally. The jar is “an artificial domain bound on top and bottom by imaginary parallel lines (Shoptaw 1).” This is a domain of people, of course, not of garbage, and the boundaries are more imagined than anything. Were it a natural object which the “wilderness rose up to,” there would be no shift in perception, and no poem.

Reading this as a garbage poem, the relations shift: the jar is not a boundary but *beyond the boundaries of civilization*, discarded, useless. And were the jar to stand for itself, for discarded waste, its effect on the natural world would be far more concrete. The poem is more sobering than “Man on the Dump” given its final stanza in particular; the jar “took dominion everywhere,” it was “gray and bare,” and it “did not give of bird or bush.” It took over everything and contributed nothing. And that is how we the reader are left. Stevens does not circle back to the self or in fact to anything, and there is no resolution— only dominion. The poem is largely anthropocentric, but in this manner it pushes the boundaries of anthropocentrism to something beyond it, toward perhaps a glimpse of the geostory.

While reading early and mid-twentieth century garbage poetry with contemporary ecocritical and ecological concerns in mind may seem unfair, it’s worth examining these early manifestations of poetic environmental reflections at the very least in order to see what has been carried forward into the era of environmentalism. A more blatant disconnection between the texts and the environment, the poet as a transcendent transformer appears less and less as the accountability of the artist becomes a more central question. But more subtle operations, like the hiding of garbage in plain sight or

the poem's degree (or lack) of engagement with ecologies and systems, require more aggressive scrutiny. So much of the work these poems do involves pointing at garbage but leading our eye anywhere but to the actual dump. They do exactly what we do as a civilization with garbage: they hide it in nature, naturalize is at part of the ongoing relationship between civilization and nature; they turn it into a way of enlightening us about ourselves but not about our garbage. Picking these poems apart does not kneecap what they do but points on what they *don't* do which we might think they do: work with garbage. Picking them part reveals the lack of a systems critique which we currently desperately need. Not until close to the turn of the twenty-first century do we see poetry substantially and consistently working to question and replace these residual Romantic impulses.

CHAPTER II: TRASHING THE PASTORAL WITH AMMONS'S *GARBAGE*

A mid-late twentieth century poet with no particular school affiliations, A.R. Ammons has consistently been a keen observer of the natural world with his scientific background often making itself known; his works and his long poems in particular, *Sphere* or *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, patiently explore the potential unification of the minute and endlessly varied details of his observations (Schneider). Ammons's book-length poem *Garbage* begins to explore garbage as an ecology, an environment which is distinguished from rather than replacing the natural environment. Unlike "Man on the Dump" and other previous anthropocentric texts, *Garbage* works to move material trash to the foreground and to show its complexity rather than using it as a reflective backdrop to bring to light the complexity of the speaker. Ammons blends a conscious reflection of self with an exploration of the text's ecology working to step out of that self, and while he undoubtedly draws on metaphorical garbage his text departs from previous garbage poetry by engaging with uncertainty and the unknowable.

Garbage has been praised by critics for its innovative contemplation of garbage, a relatively new poetic focal point. Published in 1993, this text arrives at a time when environmentalism and climate change was circulating the cultural consciousness, coinciding with "ecopoetics as a critical practice," distinct from ecocriticism and having "its real beginnings in the 1980s, with its first significant publications arriving mostly in the 1990s" (Hume and Osborne 7). *Garbage* does not however particularly draw on or rely on this discourse to distinguish itself or establish its own ethos. Although it briefly

touches on contemporary environmentalism— “this is a scientific poem”— the poem depicts a nuanced, modern and modestly incomplete condition of material waste without relying on any scientific consensus and without moralizing or preaching (Ammons 20).

Garbage stands apart from Ammons’s own canon as a singular text which demonstrates and coincides with a larger cultural shift in thinking. We can see this looking at one of Ammons’s previous poems published a few decades prior, “City Limits,” which exhibits many of the sentiments and mechanics that *Garbage* moves away from. While not as clearly divided visually, the structure mirrors the linear, two-part arrangement of “This Compost;” syntactically it’s an if-then relationship in six stanzas. The first four stanzas are a series of contemplations, starting with “When you consider the radiance, that it does not / withhold itself but pours its abundance without selection,” and what follows are illuminations presumably granted by the radiance. This offers a straightforward visibility and clarity which *Garbage* actively challenges. We are asked to consider for instance “flies swarming the dumped / gut of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit,” which “in no / way winces from its storms of generosity.” Each consideration is something shown to us and which the radiant light does “not flin[ch] into disguise or darkening,” reminding us that we are the ones who impose value or aesthetic judgments on an indifferent nature.

“City Limits” isn’t about the indifference or nature; like so many other garbage poems, it comes down to what the speaker does with these considerations of unpleasant but unashamed images. In this case, “the heart moves roomier, the man stands and looks about,” in a realization that “the dark / work of the deepest cells is of a tune with May bushes;” like Whitman’s speaker, recognizing that the vernal growth necessarily comes

from the dead animal or the shit coil. And in the end the “fear lit by the breadth of such calmly turns to praise.” A clear and simple contemplation results in understanding and calm, and the poem comes to a close. We don’t see any transformation or transcendence, but the vast breadth of nature’s dealings are resolved within the limited perceptions and feelings of the speaker; we end not in the natural world but in the speaker’s head. From beginning to end, even in fear, the speaker is settled, authoritative, somewhat detached. We are given once again the cycle of death and rebirth, but no real sense of a complex, grounded ecology.

Garbage turns all of this on its head, beginning by posing a central and deceptively simple question, “what are we to think of waste, though;” and it is as an explicit answer to this question that critics have read this poem (90). Following this, *Garbage* has been seen to provide us with this propositional poetic “what,” as we see for instance in Lorraine DiCicco’s description of Ammons: “The garbologist-philosopher makes it his task to rifle this site of broken shards and rotting refuse primarily so as to piece together the fragments into some pattern in order to discern what meaning (if any) they harbor” (168). The gravity of this central question however is that it, unlike previous garbage poems, it goes deliberately unanswered, and more so that *Garbage* poses the question in order to show it to be *unanswerable*.

By working to bring material garbage to the foreground and explore its nuances, *Garbage* departs from previous garbage poetry of the century in several crucial ways. It challenges certain sacred elements and mechanisms of nineteenth century Romanticism that have been present, as well as the divine transformation of waste in the previous garbage poems of the twentieth century. *Garbage* also refrains from outright praising

garbage as a newfound aesthetic underdog, and also from offering conclusions or solutions to the waste problem. For any sort of resolution to be considered, the premises must be understood, and *Garbage* is the poem that reconsiders what these premises might be. This chapter explores the possibilities and implications of these premises and how *Garbage* reshapes the poetic conversation about garbage.

In order to understand how Ammons draws attention to garbage, it's important to recognize the manner in which critical readings actually end up hiding garbage. Critics describe *Garbage* as both innovative *and* continuing the traditions from Chapter 1 and as a result many real innovations or distinctions remain unattended. On the whole, criticism continually diverts itself from discussing Ammons's direct discussions of material garbage. Appraisals of *Garbage* have entailed several trends which have decentered material garbage as a complex focal point of *Garbage*, and in turn have left Ammons's innovations understated. There is a pattern in critical readings that approach or describe *Garbage* as a nature poem, keeping their critical eye on nature rather than garbage; as a result, there is a tendency to speak of Ammons as a contemporary Romantic. Garbage becomes a vehicle to something else. Similarly pervasive is the way *Garbage* is framed with nineteenth century Romanticism, which is not inaccurate but does present limitations. Finally, critical readings continue to use too-broad definitions of waste, allowing them to lean heavily on a sacredness or divinity through which garbage is transformed by the poet.

The most consistent ways in which critics cover up garbage in *Garbage* comes about when they conflate material garbage with metaphors of waste, something which all readings do to some extent. Christopher Anderson's study pays the closest attention to

garbage as he deliberately distinguishes between different waste categories, citing Ammons as “address[ing] the environmental and social problems created by trash, but nonetheless suggest[ing] that toxic garbage might create a global community by the need for international problem-solving” (54). Notably, this line cited in isolation insists directly on addressing and solving a global problem. Anderson reflects an engagement with the severity and scale of garbage as a global crisis and not primarily in terms of an individual and their material property. He does present garbage as a human problem, not a nature problem, and thus possible to address and ameliorate— although ultimately he turns everything over for the poet to transform, focusing instead on refining only perceptions of garbage. He also posits the notion of garbage as sublime, pivoting away from his articulation of garbage as a worldly problem with worldly solutions toward a gesture of resignation or surrender, and separation, to the beautiful awe of garbage. Experiencing *Garbage* (and garbage) as sublime bears risky limitations, and a more productive or progressive reading lies in approaching Ammons’s poem as deliberately counter sublime.

In a similar turn to the metaphorical, Voros’s study works with a broad swathe of definitions for waste, “whether it be material or ideational is what is left over, what can no longer be used...trash also connotes rank excess of production” (162). Specifically regarding *Garbage*, she “piles [each definition] altogether, conflating cultural, linguistic, material and other genres of waste.” No single definition sticks, and his conclusion is a sort of anthropological redemption in that “a culture’s trash and the meaning by which the culture processes it reveals much about what it holds meaningful and valuable” (172). Like Stevens’s man on the dump, she argues *Garbage* “evince[s] faith in the possibilities

of language to transfigure cultural junk and effect renewal” and thus demonstrates poetry’s ability to “integrat[e] the human experience with the larger, nonhuman.” What this nonhuman presence does other than reflect the human’s presence back to them is unclear. And the suggested integration of experiences does not reach its potential given the virtual absence of garbage’s materiality in his study.

Voros calls Ammons “the latter-day man on the dump,” where the man is once again on the dump but “the dump is on the man’s mind, too” (167). Ammons gives us the familiar “poet as alchemist who transforms trash govern[ing]” much of the poem, but he gives us too “the problematic figure of the dump truck driver who both adds his load to the trash heap and presides over the dump as a high priest” (167). We have two different subjects at work here, the poet whose work “is at times akin to that of the driver,” and the poet as priest engaging with what Voros calls “the dump’s inherently mythic role” (168). The primary tension in the poem exists between these two, the earthly figure who adds to (and implicitly has created) the dump, and the transcendent figure for whom the dump is a “temple of transfiguration” (168). For Voros though the poem doesn’t address the tension directly; the “ceremoniaz[ed]... act of garbage disposal” is geared toward “recogniz[ing] that a culture’s trash and the means by which the culture processes it reveals much about what it holds meaningful and valuable” (172). As a socially constructed material, for *Garbage* “rubbish is material approaching a condition analogous to that of wilderness in nature”—but this overlap is one of “metaphoric possibilities of the dump” rather than one of disastrous consequences for nature, the darker half of the metaphoric possibilities. Voros identifies a tension but ultimately lets it rest and lets

Ammons fall in line with Stevens as a transformer of metaphorical trash through language.

One of Ammons's major innovations in garbage poetry is thinking about garbage as part of a (mal)functioning ecology rather than a static background. While Spiegelman describes Ammons as "the poet as ecologist," the ecology he attributes to Ammons remains oddly detached from the contemporary particulars of the natural world, instead working within a much broader system; "Ammons has shown how the human consciousness, indeed the entire human self, is always connected to the cosmos— call it nature, call it the universe" (52). *Garbage* in turn is less about ecological trauma and more "about our common destiny, both a celebration and a darker grieving" (55-6) This insight is emblematic of the critical urge to speak of Ammons's innovation by making him a sort of contemporary Romantic, an appreciator of the old nature but with a new trashy lens. Spiegelman's study of *Garbage* draws attention to Ammons's treatment of nature, asserting that "the nature derided by poststructuralists as a human construct instead of an external given retains its power to inspire original, powerful, sometimes somber and sometimes whimsical poetic observations" (52). Spiegelman does not however follow up on this undoing of nature and reverts to a familiar mechanism: the poem's procession "*from earthly to spiritual*, as Ammons pursues a pilgrimage of almost Dantean proportions, moving from the warm, burning garbage of the earth to speculation about the heavens and eternity itself" (54, emphasis mine). He leaves the trash pile behind for great things, but the trash pile goes nowhere, hidden behind grandiose divinity.

Spiegelman asserts that through poetry "[f]rom the organic, fertilizing decay of the original compost heap there has come a rich, heady produce," positioning Ammons in

line behind Whitman (65). But he moves beyond Whitman, or rather furthers where Whitman started, as “[a]ll garbage, even when it partakes of the noxious, the gothic, the indestructible, becomes for him an occasion for celebration” (58). Outside of a difference in tone and composure from Whitman, any notion of Ammons’s originality or complexity is subordinated by the comfort of contemplating garbage in spiritual, ethereal terms, in large part because Spiegelman sticks close to the Romantic human-nature dynamic; even while he switches out nineteenth century nature for twentieth century garbage, his focal point in *Garbage* is still a heartening return to the natural world even as it is filled up with trash.

Taking Morrison’s acknowledgement of the eternal presence of garbage but seemingly without her caveat about equalization, Voros links Ammons’s conception of his ecological cosmos to the final lines of Ovid: “‘No species stays the same, but Nature the renewer always creates new forms from other ones: Believe me, nothing ever dies in the world; it rather changes and renews its form... Although things may shift from this to that, their totality always remains the same’” (53-4). This is a frighteningly transcendent perspective given that, in Ammons’s world, the “this or that” which shifts includes the global ecology and, notably, human beings. In Ovid Nature is a stable agent of renewal we no longer have the luxury to indulge. “As a ‘scientific poem’ *Garbage* inductively reports a reality... as a romantic poem organized, at least in part, along the lines of Coleridgean organicism it tries to imitate as well as describe the reality of which it constitutes a part. A poem may be shapely, like a life;” and to this I add, as a garbage poem, *Garbage* opens up different points of entry for and contradictions about the highly

problematic relationship between the poet, the poem, and the poem's corresponding material waste (56).

This tendency to focus on the natural world of *Garbage* is prevalent. Buell describes Ammons as “post human, postmodern, post environmentalist,” but nature nevertheless appears to remain intact. He approaches the poem in an intriguing way, citing Jameson's concept of “romantic apocalypse” to understand the alleged exultation of waste. “One of the most telling of these comic-romantic transmutations of garbage is where Ammons reads the landfill as a site of regeneration and renewal, poetic and spiritual as well as physical.”

Approaching an ecological conception by addressing the substantial length of the poem, Helen Vendler describes the scope of *Garbage* as both “extraordinarily broad” and “in another respect, the surround of the Ammons lyric moment is narrow. Though amply extended into the natural world, and occasionally into the domestic one, it is rarely political, social, or commercial in the ordinary meanings of those words” (23-4).

Ammons casts his gaze on himself and far from himself to the cosmological ecology, but his orbit is fairly narrow and steady. Rather than treating *Garbage* as didactic or favoring certain passages, Vendler tries to take on the whole poem not by engaging with its direct statements or declarations about garbage but by exploring how the poem's long form and spatial arrangement work “confined to the inwardly reflective” to “achieve both breadth and depth” (25). And how, in turn, this long form draws the reader's attention to waste. For Vendler, *Garbage* cannot be studied piecemeal; she finds it “almost impossible to quote briefly from...since its mind-loops are long pensive arcs” (39). Central to the elusive nature of the poem is “its internal dynamic of perpetual changes [which] means

that its cantos do not proceed in any easily foreseeable (and therefore graspable) form” (40). Rather than focusing on the poet as transfigurer to sort the mess of trash out, Vendler focuses on a broader, less intuitive ecology which can’t be represented by a singular image or nailed down.

The “internal dynamics” or components at work— emotional meditation, narrative, scene, aphorism, something ugly, something beautiful, and finally poetry itself—, rather than any particular statement or passage, urge the reader to consider the subject matter (41). Which, for Vendler, is waste, extinction, and death. While waste is rarely mentioned throughout, it does find a spot in her concluding synthesis that the “point of all Ammons’s unsettling changes (thematic, generic, lexical) is to mimic a universe constituted of continual creations and destructions, to ratify a metaphysics acceding to the necessity of change, and to announce an ethics of protest, urge (if helplessly so) against the human waste entailed by the universal principles of destruction—genetic, metabolic, political, catastrophic” (47). *Garbage* in other words works to deliberately provoke the reader, albeit quite subtly and indirectly, to protest or action by way of the poem’s different components’ interactions within the long form.

Wilkinson’s study parallels Vendler’s, although more abstractly, focusing on garbage as the language and structure of poetry itself, in which garbage is not only the subject matter of *Garbage* but the work the poem itself does: “*Garbage* is as much about aboutness as what it’s about...*Garbage* is poetry that makes great show of redundancy in trying to get at something without trying too hard, as though redundancy were an important resource, which may well be true is garbage is the poem’s stuff” (3). Here Wilkinson presents a different relationship between the poet and garbage, a

nontransformative one in which the garbage remains garbage. The waste of Ammons's poem remains of this earth while simultaneously pushing toward a conceptual reading: "*Garbage* and dead language produce more energy than the nicer alternatives. *Garbage* and its gaseous emissions are more vernacular than air's windy discursiveness" (4). He describes Ammons as performing the same waste his poem describes; the author is "chuntering" through this poem which is an extensive "writing about" what John Wilkinson calls "much of muchness" (3).

The poem becomes a self-referential microcosm in which Ammons is writing about "writing *about*" or circling around. As with Vendler, Wilkinson does not rely on particular passages for an understanding of the poem but proposes what he calls an "approximation" as the poem "draws close, rather than missing the point or remaining at a distance" (7). Less provocative perhaps than the complexity of unsettling internal dynamics, this approximation nevertheless reflects the possibility of a spatial rather than propositional understanding of *Garbage*. This grand abstraction collapses the poet, the poem & the subject matter together, removing the need for any transformative mechanism, but also risks shutting the poem off from interactions with anything outside of itself. The poet as a divine or mystical transformer of waste has been a cornerstone of garbage poetry criticism, one that has established and exhausted itself, and lost potency in the wake of widespread scientific and cultural awareness of human-made climate change and its ongoing fallout. Similarly, praising waste or garbage as previously unsung core component of modern civilization rings a bit false. And while nature and material waste undoubtedly overlap, reading *Garbage* or any garbage poetry as centered on nature tends to eclipse the materiality, distinction, and permanence of trash.

Garbage Oriented Ontology

Departing from previous garbage poems, Ammons's speaker consciously positions himself in and around garbage in order to address the complexity and elusiveness of garbage. He offers underlying thoughts articulated by the speaker on which much of the rest of the poem hinges. The first is that question posed which never finds an answer in the poem, "what are we to think of waste, though" (90). This is the question of the poem, the question at the foundation of all garbage poetry, whether the "we" is the population at large or the poet contemplating garbage. This question, and just as importantly the lack of a single or definitive answer in the poem, demonstrates that *Garbage* performs an investigative rather than resolute move. One possible answer is, of course, the romanticized transformation of garbage by the poet.

The second comes when he admits "I don't know anything much about garbage / dumps: I mean, I've never climbed one: I / Don't know about the smells: do masks masks / scent: or is there a deodorizing mask" (35). This admission comes and goes casually but nevertheless establishes his proximity with garbage, what he knows about it and how he has personally experienced it. I choose these two thoughts because everything in the poem comes back to what the speaker thinks, what the speaker knows, what he experiences— and what these three have to do with garbage in the world. He explores both the immediate and sacredly abstract, and he admits a certain degree of complicity with this world— but not complacency, nor does he entirely leave himself out.

These three relationships or proximities with garbage form the exploration of the ecology Ammons lays out. Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), particularly Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*, doesn't focus specifically on garbage but becomes useful given

that the physical space between civilization and garbage or individual people and garbage has been central to any metaphorical understanding of garbage. Morrison had used OOO's foundational notion that all things exist equally and not simply for human purposes in order to establish her affinity with garbage, although other passages in Bogost's text suggest a certain distance may not only be inevitable but desirable. OOO can help establish a suitable way to approach garbage or even have Morrison's affinity for garbage without necessarily welcoming it in the same manner we would welcome an *other* with that Levinasian human face.

Instead of embracing garbage as kin, we can ask "*what it means to be something...* a question that exceeds our own grasp of the being of the world" (30). "The alien might not be life, at all. As Bernhard Waldenfels puts it, the alien is 'the inaccessibility of a particular region of experience and sense.' ...the alien is not limited to another *person*, or even another *creature*. The alien is anything— and everything— to everything else" (34). The encompassing reach and omnipresence of the alien does not null its existence, though, and may instead prompt continual investigation.

Bogost parses out dimensions of things and objects in a way that leaves continually knowledge gaps between ourselves and these things. "Things are not *merely* what they do, but things *do indeed do things...* We must not confuse the values of the *design* of the objects for human use, such as doors, toasters and computers, with the *nature* of the world itself," a nature we are not, nor will ever be, entirely privy to (28). In order to explore more precisely what is going on with these things or objects, Bogost designates the term *unit* in order to "revea[l] a feature of being that the thing and the object occlude... something is always something else, too: a gear in another mechanism,

a relation in another assembly, a part in another whole” (26). Unlike Morrison, Bogost suggests that not naming things may well be an ethically preferable approach.

“[Labels] mark [things] with relevance, but they also occlude the richness of their infinite depths” (58). Even if a name establishes in affinity, it blocks a possible affinity with all of the aspects of the thing which that same label necessarily excludes. OOO uses the term “‘black noise’ to describe the background noise of peripheral objects: ‘It is not a white noise of screeching, chaotic qualities demanding to be shaped by the human mind, but rather a black noise of muffled objects hovering at the fringes of our attention’” (33).

Recognizing and tending to these infinite depths or black noise, the unknown and perhaps forever unknowable dimensions of garbage, clears a massive space for the garbage to do something other than be rehabilitated and redeemed as far as human functions go. After all, especially given the prominence of throw-away culture and the expectation that so many things— clothes, computers, cars— will be replaced again and again, there are obvious limits to restoring something to its person-oriented function. Rather than restoring a cycle of death and regeneration, redeeming garbage may just as well perpetuate a system of throwing away and more throwing away.

To be clear, these infinite depths are not scientific unknowns; the effects of garbage on ecologies on virtually any scale is well account for but this alone of course does not make it go away. “Unlike the jobs of horticulturalists, physicists, or forest rangers, alien phenomenology is not a practice of scientific naturalism, seeking to define the physical or causal relations between objects” (62). While garbage and its ecological effects may be more or less accounted for, its position in our daily consciousness and behavior resembles not the *other* but the alien. “The true alien recedes interminably even

as it surrounds us completely. It is not hidden in the darkness of the outer cosmos or in the deep-sea shelf but in plain sight, everywhere, in everything” (34). Unlike the other, the alien is everywhere and therefore nowhere in particular, and we cannot approach it as such let alone gain knowledge of its entirety. It is crucial that we not fill this perpetual knowledge gaps with something else or push them aside.

In garbage poetry, the alien is of course garbage— not the experience of garbage as a unit a la OOO but instead our own knowledge and experience of garbage. Bogost uses two terms, *withdrawal* and *meanwhile*, that highlight our peculiar relationship with garbage. Withdrawal essentially refers to that perpetual unknowability of garbage; even after we have established substantial foundations of scientific knowledge, there is still something else going on, something that isn’t clicking. This going on is the “meanwhile,” the nonspatial nonscientific dimension of garbage actively at work. While this could potentially shift the agency (and therefore blame) to garbage for withdrawing, I think just as well this continual withdrawal, an inadvertent inhuman recession from us, reminds us we need to continually pursue.

Acknowledging the perpetual withdrawal of objects allows for a different kind of positive engagement without creating an exaggerated affinity. Bogost discusses the value of feeling *wonder* toward an object, which means specifically “to suspend all trust in one’s own logics, be they religion, science, philosophy, custom, or opinion, and to become subsumed entirely in the uniqueness of an object’s native logics” (124). To truly wonder is to come as close as you can to meeting the object on its own terms, which involves recognizing an unbridgeable, unknowable gap. “Yet wonder has been all but eviscerated in modern thought, left behind as a naive delusion. When we approach

objects social relativists, they bear interest only as products or regulators of human behavior and society” (124). In fact for both “science and philosophy... wonder is a void, the opening for a tunnel that leads somewhere more viable. It is a means” (126). OOO works to let the void be valued as a void, and importantly calls for only suspending one’s own lenses rather than debunking or discarding them.

“scientists plunge into matter looking for the / matter but the matter lessens and, looked too / far into, expands away” (30). Ammons channels OOO’s perspective on science, not disregarding it by any means but noting its cultural limitations with the play on the word “matter.” They look for the matter (object) as well as the matter (problem), and both lessen—the matter as the garbage problem lessens or expands away in the sense that solutions and action don’t necessarily follow the firmly identified problem. The matter as garbage itself “expands away,” both increasing and moving away from us. The immersive plunge grants withdrawal instead of revelation; garbage in this moment is not a stand-in for romantic nature but a contemporary matter in which we find ourselves surrounded by uncertain. Garbage is a shroud, not an escape or return.

Garbage, like the alien, both surrounds us and eludes us, withdraws from our consciousness. Rather than working to establish a human affinity, to give garbage a face we recognize, we might instead recognize its alien dimensions. We know so much about it, its sources and its effects, but the restless “infinity of the *meanwhile*” requires our constant attention and strongly suggests at times we approach it from outside our scientific knowledge and logic (50). While it may seem counterintuitive for garbage poetry to defer scientific explorations of a scientifically measurable problem—and I’m not arguing that it should avoid science—easing up on its reliance on science helps steer

garbage poetry away from didacticism or propositional solutions. This, I believe, is exactly what *Garbage* does. Rather than looking for different solutions or propositions or present idealized cycles of perfect resolution, we can read Ammons's text searching for different *meanwhiles* or trying to explore *wonder* in the text's various proximities.

Ammons lays out a world which reaches from the individual to the cosmic, and while he explicitly points to one he doesn't create a fully functional system or ecology as such. His scope is broad but he doesn't show us a lot of moving parts. Instead, looking for local or individual proximities and reading with OOO in mind works well toward understanding how Ammons using space and his own knowledge and experience of garbage. The proximities in *Garbage* are central to reading the poem as a grounded, current contemplation of material waste, as moving away from Romantic conceptions. The space the poem establishes between the speaker and elements of the poem's world, namely garbage, continually highlights the limitations of the speaker's experience and knowledge. Unlike the shorter garbage poems of the early and mid-century, including his own "City Limits," *Garbage* is filled with holes and speculation, voids perhaps, which in turn establish the poem's architecture and efficacy. To be clear, Ammons doesn't begin as a transformative romantic in the beginning and find himself grounded and contemporary at the end; other than being likely unconvincing, this would also suggest he had reached a solution or a track toward a solution. Instead, in this ecology of himself, garbage and the cosmos he embeds different approaches to garbage, different metaphors working with garbage, and allows them to interact. The poem does not answer the question "what do we are we to think of waste" but instead continually circles back to the prompt and thinks about waste.

The trick to Ammons's poetic innovation is that he includes responses to garbage across the spectrum, including the more static and dated manner of the early century. The way he talks about writing *Garbage* for instance sounds awfully abstract and romanticized. He describes "seeing the sacred in the lowly" as "[w]hen forms have used themselves up, and by that I mean people or language or any other kind of construct, and it's worn out and jaded and thrown away... On the planet, nothing is dumped off, so it has to be regenerated and transfigured and to become the new things. It seems to me that this is among the greatest concerns of sacred literature—the transfiguration from death and decay and degeneration into the spirit or the new world or the coming back of things... There is this passage through the lowest before there is another cycle that could possibly attain the highest. This seems to me one of the most frequently contemplated subjects in mythology and religion" (Schneider 326). He finds a "deep satisfaction in having the lowliest meet the highest, rather than separate things in the world into categories such as the secular and the sacred, the pure and the bad" (326). In just a short time Ammons runs through the gamut of how garbage poetry has been operating, apart from any general environmental or ecological concerns. The garbage which doesn't leave the planet in material form is abruptly abandoned for myths of cycles and renewal, to which actual trash is only tangentially metaphorically related.

More so, he follows the familiar path to of redemption through the imagination; a garbage dump he drove by compelled him to write, but "there is a mound, / too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled / off to and burned down on, the energy held and / shaped into new turns as clusters, the mind / strengthened by what it strengthens: for / where but in the very asshole of comedown is / redemption" (20-1). An important

distinction though is that while the system may remain intact here, it is not the moment nor the definitive one *Garbage* talks about dumps and the imagination and redemption. There is still *meanwhile*.

Further reflecting on lines from *Garbage* regarding his limited experience, he tells in an interview that he “first [saw] that mound of garbage” a “couple of years prior to writing the poem” (325). He calls this garbage heap “very high and impressive,” and that’s about the immersive extent of his inspiration (326). Upon seeing it he recounts “connecting it very quickly with sacred images— Mayan temples, ziggurats of Sumeria” which “brought together for me the sacred and profane;” and this ziggurat-dump becomes a central image to the poem. “It’s usually in trying to deal with the problems of one’s time that one creates the sacred images,” although the level with which the problem is dealt has been mostly what the poet sees and thinks and can create, and not how to further address what at this time was known to be an urgent worldly problem.

Garbage stands apart because it frames these neat, familiar mechanics within a larger, messier world in which no single approach or conception is pivotal. We can’t simply take the author’s word on what his poem does, or assume that it simply and only does what he happens to mention in a linear interview. Certainly *Garbage* does create a sacred image in response to a problem of the time, but it doesn’t place this central image at the center of the garbage problem— *meanwhile*, the poem does other things. Rather than recycling myths of transformation and regeneration straight up, *Garbage* uses them to point out their own limitations and eventually they break.

In the opening pages the speaker encounters a Romantic Muse figure which Vendler describes as “a self-mocking contemporary version of the Muse’s summoning

the poet to his vocation” (40). These “creepy little creepers” which “insinuate” rather than inspire invite the poet to “questio[n] not only his own authority but the authority of the Muse” which has been “debase[d]” (40). Mockery and debasement may be on the harsh side, although this invocation does lend the speaker both authority and humility. He seeks to reinforce a sense of purpose himself, for “why shouldn’t I / at my age (63) concentrate on chucking the / advancements and rehearsing the sweetnesses of / leisure, nonchalance, and small-time byways”? (14). Why not retire rather than write a piece the world may very well “twirl without”? (13). The voice of the muse becomes a somewhat mundane conversation with himself; the distance between the poet and the muse here is zero. This divinity isn’t debased or written off necessarily but grounded and immediate, in part as the poet thinks about what he’s being told and where the voice is coming from. This “creepy” muse does its work in earnest skepticism, and lacking any divine nature forces the poet to question & consider the voice.

Taken at face value, this Muse is unpleasant and uncomfortable— “Creepy little creepers...curling up my spine” recalls worms in a decomposing body. And that’s the subject of *Garbage*, the disturbing confrontation with the unpleasant at face value, something physical and creepy and among us. This not-so-divine source recalls the book’s dedication page written “*to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers, wordsmiths—the transfigurers, restorers.*” This echoes familiar terms about other poets transforming with their words, but the bacteria and bugs are an interesting addition— humble, biological rather than idealistic or ideological. From the start, the speaker openly exhibits his hesitations and less-than-inspired attitude toward his endeavor. The muse’s suggestion is something the poet must actively respond to and engage with rather than

something wondrous that is bestowed upon him; in spite of Ammons's perpetually light and playful tone, the task is serious and something of a burden, and he's frank about not being thrilled to tears about it. Spatially, the muse comes not from within but from inside the speaker, not as a blessed messenger but an uncomfortable feeling at the speaker's core. This is not a muse of transformation and transcendence but of drudgery and mess. Spatial relationships define the world of *Garbage* from the very beginning, often working as in this case to gently separate the post-speaker from previous manifestations of the poet-transformer. Without breaking it, Ammons uses the figure of the muse to question it and suggest moving beyond its limitations.

In addition to his closeness with the muse, the speaker inversely distances himself physically from garbage, explicitly exhibiting the limits of his knowledge. Prefacing one of the most cited passages in the poem, the trash man on the ziggurat-dump, is his declaration of relative ignorance: "I don't know anything much about garbage / dumps: I mean, I've never climbed one: I / don't know about the smells: do masks mask /scent: or is there a deodorizing mask" (35). Later he recalls his vain attempt at researching garbage at the library, where he "punched / out Garbage at the library and four / titles swept the screen, only one, Garbage Feed, / seeming worth going on to; and that was about / feeding swine right: so I punched Garbage Disposal / and the screen came blank— nothing! all those / titles, row on row, but not a word on Disposal" (49). His brief search turns up nothing, and he thinks for a moment "I should have looked, I suppose, under Waste Disposal" but immediately dismisses the idea; "but, who cares, I already got the point: I / know garbage is being "disposed" of— but what / I wanted I had gotten, a clear space and pure / freedom to dump whatever" (49). Established knowledge on the subject

doesn't inform his writing in any particular way; the lack of information at his fingertips appears actually to liberate him. And it isn't a malicious ignorance, simply one that he acknowledges as part of his writing— unlike a figure such as Stevens's man on the dump whose position suggests mastery or immersion where there really is none. The effects his ignorance have on actual garbage is another question, but Ammons in any case sets up a more nuanced, and more likely, relationship with the dump. This admission of ignorance followed by him writing the poem anyway suggests we can't take his exploration of the dump at his word. In lieu of direct experience climbing the dump or indirect knowledge researching it, we are given the mythic version of the garbage heap, the ziggurat.

After his wriggling muse has somehow persuaded him, Ammons continually returns to the poet's task of writing about garbage; and even after the muse has receded into his spine he isn't entirely convinced. "why shouldn't I / at my age (63) concentrate on chucking the / advancements and rehearsing the sweetness of / leisure, nonchalance" (14). Something compels him to carry on, although he later writes that he has "become convinced that I don't have / anything particularly to convince anybody of" (57). The poem moves forward conscious of the limitations of authority or didacticism, and of its dangers as well; "in fact, / having learned about commanding silence and / having, mostly by accident, commanded it a few / times, I've become afraid of convincingness, / what harm it can do if there is too much of / it along with whatever good, so I am now a / little uncertain on purpose" (56). Ammons is convinced that the poem is worth writing, so convinced of its importance that he doesn't want to betray the subject matter. He doesn't have a particular long-term plan for the poem either, other than that it probably shouldn't in fact be short; "how to write this / poem, should it be short, a small popping of /

duplexes, or long, hunting wide, coming home / late, losing the trail and recovering it: / should it act itself out, illustrations, / examples, colors, clothes or intensify / reductively into statement, bones any corpous, would do to surround, or should it be nothing / at all unless it finds itself” (20). He may sound a bit like an unreliable speaker but he’s more of an uncertain speaker at least somewhat aware of what’s at stake. He wonders “how can we intercede and not / interfere: how can our love move more surroundingly, / convincingly than our premonitory advice” (15). Rather than telling us what to do or knowing what to do, the poem is more interested in the process, including his own, of approaching garbage. He’s not interested in saying what but in saying itself: “I have nothing to say: / what I want to say is saying: I want to be / singing, sort of” (Ammons 76). Throughout *Garbage* he is adamant both about being uncertain and continuing.

He does seem reasonably certain that “garbage *has* to be the poem of our time because / garbage is spiritual, believable enough / to get our attention, getting in the way, piling / up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and / creamy white: what else deflects us from the / errors of our illusionary ways, not a temptation / to trashlessness, that is too far off, and, / anyway, unimaginable, unrealistic” (18, emphasis mine). What else indeed. While garbage *is* spiritual, *is* believable enough and so on, it *has to be* the poem of our time, and therefore perhaps is not, not yet. It is the uncertain task of *Garbage* to be a poem of the time, or at least gesture toward one. This insistence creates a space for doubt between the material and spiritual blatancy of garbage, and the cultural or ideological acceptance of garbage as central to our time.

Like other garbage writers, Ammons draws parallels between poetry and waste and it turns out they have a lot in common— but Ammons pushes the metaphor until it

bends and cracks. Garbage is persistent, disruptive, an outlier, as the “clear-through plastic lid” which, unlike other “leavings” or “scraps” or “breadcrumbs” does not decompose (85). Ecologically this plastic lid is a problem, but being disruptive, lasting, calling attention to itself, demanding something be made of it, all fit the profile for poetry as well. Ammons describes “a waste of words, a flattened-down, smoothed- / over mesa of styrofoam verbiage; since words were / introduced here things have gone poorly for the / planet: it’s been between words and rivers, / surface-mining words and hilltops, cuneiform / records in priestly piles” (Ammons 74). Words are inseparable from waste, excessive like waste, even a type of waste. Both have, tongue-in-cheek granted, had disastrous effects on the world— and both have their tentative necessity of existence.

Words and poetry are akin to waste but in another instance poetry is distinctly apart from waste, “like an installation at a Marine / Shale: it reaches down into the dead pit / and cool oil of stale recognition and words and / brings up hauls of stringy gook which it arrays / with light and strings with shiny syllables and / gets the mind back into vital relationship with / communication channels: but, of course, there / is some untransformed material, namely the poem / itself; the minute its transmutations ends, it / becomes a relic sometimes only generations or / sets of countrywide generations can degrade” (108-9). In *Garbage*’s world of cycles and recycling, for a short moment this transformative mechanism remains untransformed itself. Ammons’s metaphor quickly blurs the line between materiality and imaginative; the same poem installation which physically rescues ocean trash simultaneously redeems it with language in the way which garbage poems claim to do, ultimately to affect the mind. The materiality of the ocean salvage becomes abandoned, but if the mechanism for salvage itself will remain

untransformed garbage, we don't need to think too hard about what happens to the ocean trash.

Garbage introduces another bizarre metaphor for language, this one centered not on garbage but animals. "I know the entire language of chickens, / from rooster crows to biddy cheeps: it is a / language sufficient to the forms of procedures / nature assigns to chicken-birds but a language, / as competition goes, not sufficient to protect / them from us: our systems now / change their genes, their forms and procedures, / house them up in all-life houses, trick their / egg laying with artificial days and nights: (51-2). Language here becomes an imperial excess as the language of science and computers and genetic code invades the lives of chickens. Language here really *does* transform, bending the existence of chickens toward our own end. But at the same time, immediately following these lines, it remains peripheral: "our language is something to write home about: / but it is not the world: / grooming does for / baboons most what words do for us" (51-2). As sophisticated and encompassing as we think our language is, we might just as well be overestimating its abilities and rather than transforming ourselves and our ecology with it we are simply tidying ourselves up a bit.

"[I]s a poem about garbage garbage / or will this abstract, hollow junk seem beautiful / and necessary as just another offering to the / high assimilations: (that means up on top where / the smoke is; the incinerations of sin, / corruption, misconstruction pass through the / purification of flame:)" (30). Here he explores not only what we might think about garbage but what we might think about garbage poetry. He indulges in the latter—the "eternal / flame, principle of the universe," the "pure center"—but the question remains whether or not all this is "just another offering," just another beautiful but empty

elaboration on this mystical cycle (31). And he doesn't provide an answer, although he does send someone who has *an* answer, the garbage man driving the bulldozer.

Given the speaker's various conceptions, approaches, and attitude toward garbage and toward writing a poem about garbage, we should be cautious approaching what critics and Ammons himself call the central, mythical image; "the garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance / as if up ziggurats toward the high places gulls / and garbage keep alive, offerings to the gods / of garbage, of retribution, of realistic / expectation, the deities of unpleasant / necessities" (18). The trucks, the gulls, the ziggurat, and the garbage man are the central components of the scene; "with a high whine the garbage trucks slowly / circling the pyramid rising intone the morning / and atop the mound's plateau birds circling... a truck already arrived spills its goods from the back hatch and the birds as in a single computer- / formed net plunge in celebration, hallelujahs / of rejoicing" (27-8). On one hand, a scavenging flock celebrates the arrival of a new meal; on the other hand, creatures of the natural world bizarrely rejoice as we continually dump piles of poison into their world. "the driver gets out of his truck / and wanders over to the cliff on the spill ... here, the driver knows, / where the consummations gather, where the disposal / flows out of form, where the last translations / cast away their immutable bits and scraps... oh, nature, the man on the edge / of the cardboard-laced cliff exclaims, that there / could be a straightaway from the toxic past into / the fusion-lit reachers of a coming time!" (28-9).

This image is evidently so central that it repeats itself only a few pages later with the same moving parts; "the garbage spreader gets off his bulldozer and / approaches the fire: he stares into it as into / eternity, the burning edge of beginning and / ending, the

catalyst of going and becoming” (32). This is the moment of the mortal man approaching the eternal mountain of death and renewal, and “all thoughts of his house and family and / the long way he has come to be worthy of his / watch, fall away” in this romantic and absurd moment. The moment is so saturated even the birds circling have “slender wings and finely-tipped / tails [which] look so airy and yet so capable that they / must have been designed after angels or angels/ after them” (33). This man stands at the edge up the mythical dump, staring into the eternal fire as thoughts of his life and family fall away in the presence of the momentarily everlasting; but he is not a transformer but rather a mover of garbage as his bulldozer suggests. This passage offers an intently stark contrast between the romantic perspective in the mind and the heaped reality of the material garbage. How strange it would be for the bulldozer man— not Stevens’s philosopher on the imaginary dump, but a working-class man immersed in this material reality year round— to stand in such awe. The speaker is not akin to Stevens’s philosopher, the garbage man is— he is immersed in the mess, literally on top of it, and yet channels an awe for a beauty quite detached from his locale. Ammons doesn’t put himself as a poet at this dump, he puts a city worker who might actually be there; and yet somehow this dump strikes him as “the presence / of the momentarily everlasting,” with the “air about / him sacrosanct” (32). The description of the air is hard to read without also thinking of how intensely foul it must smell. Who is this man who thinks of his own personal worth standing in front tons of garbage; do people do this every time they see the dump? The sacred and profane here clash is jarring if still poignant; I don’t think Ammons is trying to make a mockery out of either the mundane and the romantic but they do butt heads here especially as the image is duplicated. He might have just placed himself at the site.

Here we reach the self-admitted limit of his knowledge of dumps and we see him defer to this imaginative, idealized poetic encounter.

As *the* image of the poem, rather than parsing out whether or not this could be a sublime moment, I think it's worth suggesting the danger of accepting the sublimity of garbage. The bulldozer man stands both before and in the dump, as he idly picks up and chucks a bottle. And while the dump may be beautiful— although this is tough to swallow, since that would mean the poem switches out the romantic subject matter for something quite not romantic but leaves the mechanism in tact— and it may be awe-ful or terrifying, it is so because the terror of the dump is entirely within our grasp of knowing, entirely our doing. Any mystery or sense of a greatness beyond ourselves would be due to ignorance, either unwilling or willing; the mystery is not in the dump itself but how we let it happen. And unlike, say, Mont Blanc, the guy is *right there*, within arm's reach of the dump, on a crossable threshold.

The bulldozer man might just as well work as the romantic contemporary garbage poet, standing right in front of a burning, festering mountain of our own various wastes— and seeing right past it to a metaphorical or mythical beauty. He performs not the work of the poet but instead provides a counterpoint to the work of *the* poet, Ammons, trying to figure out what to think about garbage. Instead of acting out the myth, as a central figure the bulldozer man clears space for us to question the myth, or creates enough space between the myth and the author-poet to wonder if they are the same thing. This encounter with the ziggurat is complicated further if we look elsewhere in the poem and discover a different train of thought; “poetry to no purpose! all this garbage! all / these words: we may replace our mountains with / trash” (75). While Ammons doesn't express

resolve one way or the other, he does express a good deal of cognitive dissonance praising a mountain of garbage and elsewhere despairing that garbage will replace mountains.

While beholden to this ziggurat-dump, the man “picks up a red bottle” with a few drops of wine and yellowjackets inside, who “are not even puzzled when he tosses the bottle way down the slopes, the still air being flown in / in the bottle even as the bottle dives through / the air!” (33). He then “realizes, the light inside the bottle will, over the weeks, change.” This action is not a transformation, or transcendence, it doesn’t renew or regenerate; it is simple movement with an unqualifiable change. The bottle has moved, looks different, the yellowjackets come and go— it seems as though it may verge on purpose and meaning. The bottle is still a bottle, but with this “change” of the light, it is not simply the same bottle, but it’s not any less the bottle it was before. It’s as though it’s wedged between the poetic redemption of the priest-poet and the insufficient, limited perspective or experience of the bulldozer man. As language garbage, it might be “shaped into new turns and clusters” drawn from the garbage heap of the imagination, but as material garbage it only— and *can* only— return to the ground. (20)

Another variation of waste *Garbage* engages with is natural waste; “the sugarmaple seeds on the blacktop are so dense, / the seedheads crushed by tires, the wings stuck / wet, they hold rains, so there’s no walkway / dry: so many seeds, and not one will make a / tree” (90). While a fairly mundane observation, it becomes more unclear when intersecting with material garbage and the notion of redemption. The seeds may be wasted, but given they are organic and will decompose or be eaten, they aren’t the same kind of waste we find in the dump. And their category as waste is furthered

questionable if we consider there will inevitably be excessive seeds if there are to be enough new trees; that maple tree isn't going to produce the precise amount of seeds and distribute them to the precise locations even if those numbers were obtainable. But waste is also historically a necessary byproduct of civilizations; medieval or modern, rural or urban, in some amount or another it's seemed intrinsic. But is the material waste of civilization inevitable in the same way that the seed waste of nature is? What happens when the metaphor of "waste" is used both for the seeds and the dump? When "the driveway is thick / with sugarmaple seed the chipmunk fills his / pouches with fast," but he doesn't fill them with waste (74).

Garbage isn't simply exploring, it is meanwhiling— looking for something unknown, perhaps unknowable, but nevertheless necessary to understand how the cosmos works. *Garbage* explores and refuses to resolve the tension between a desire for idyllic cyclical continuity and complacency. The negation of omniscience, of sufficient knowledge and experience, creates space for the complexities of his ecology to fill in, creates room for a dialogue. In asking "what are we to think of waste, though" Ammons reiterates a poetic question going back at least to Whitman but offers a fundamentally different response. In "wonde[ring] if we need those celestial guidance systems / striking mountaintops or if we need fuzzy / philosophy's abstruse reasonings" Ammons questions the sacred or mystical transformative cycle that has been pervasive in garbage poetry, his own included (15).

And by asking "is a poem about garbage garbage" he begins to implicate the poem itself and prompt further questions about the poet and the poem's accountability (30). He brings a self-awareness and self-reflexivity to his poem that is not present or

effectively prevalent in previous garbage poems. Inadvertently or otherwise, Ammons leaves us a poem which created space to explore the limits or efficacy of garbage poetry, limits which late twentieth and twenty-first century poets were adamantly willing to test.

CHAPTER III: URGENCY AND AFFECT IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

If garbage poets of the twentieth century demonstrated that waste is not in fact worthless but deserves our attention, the twenty-first century Anthropocene poets explore how terrifyingly true this is. Ammons's *Garbage* brings a much-needed complexity to garbage poetics, although the world he lays out does not bear any particular tension or anxiety. He makes an important move when he inserts himself into his own ecology, but we don't see substantial change take place within the character of the speaker. His contemplation is largely retrospective and he doesn't turn his gaze to the future at any particular point. And while *Garbage* does gesture toward the materiality of the ecopoem itself, it does not fully engage with that materiality.

The turn of the millennium brought with it increasing circulation of the conception of the Anthropocene, described by Mckenzie Wark as an epoch in history when the forces of nature and human civilization equally depend on and threaten each other. Additionally these two forces can no longer be considered two distinctly exclusive spheres that sometimes overlap; "the worldview of an ecology that was self-correcting, self-balancing, and self-healing" is no longer tenable (xii). As humans we must consider our immediate and long-lasting impact on the planet as comparable with any devastating natural disaster.

Poets of the Anthropocene continue to struggle to connect their texts to the often invisible phenomena of climate change with increasing urgency. Their reinvigorated ecopoetics collide and wrestle with the century-long praise of a marginalized waste

aesthetic with the Anthropocene as their battle ground. The effort these poets exert as they struggle to produce meaningful texts in the face of science-verified global disruption is readily apparent in their work. Unlike Ammons's speaker, these writers do not establish a humble-but-secure proximity with their subject matter but thrust themselves in the face of it; the detached philosopher-poet has become intimate, vulnerable, and emotionally expressive. At the same time, poetry itself becomes destabilized; previous poets were often the transformers of waste of champions of nature; the Anthropocene mindset falls more in line with the idea that "poetry doesn't restore ecosystems" (Russo 185).

For many recent critics, "[w]hat are we to think of garbage, though" multiplies into a number of questions about waste, ecologies, and poetry itself. Michael Sloan in "Scrap Poetics" asks, "Why poetry and trash, trash and poetry?" (89). Margaret Ronda's *Reminders* further pries into poetry—"how can a poem speak for, to, with ecological phenomena?...How does a poem make loss and extinction visible, or register new, disturbing presences, such as toxic sludge, oil spills, dead zones?" Making material garbage visible through poetry has proven to be far more complicated than looking around and writing about it. For these critics who position themselves in the Anthropocene, the value and function of the poem is as much in service to sustaining our environment as it is to finding poetic innovation. The dazzle and novelty of the garbage aesthetic fades—for all its proliferation and permanence, garbage has often appeared in poetry as a symptom on the horizon which has distracted from the immediate system which produces it.

There is some debate regarding when the Anthropocene began, particularly as the term encompasses both geological and cultural paradigm shifts. Geologically, critical dates include 1610 which emphasizes “the beginnings of colonialism and global trade;” environmentally, “the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane;” or the Great Acceleration following World War II “due to the radioactivity recorded globally in glacial ice, tree rings, and lake sediment” as well as “the changed pollen record from genetically modified crops” and “the introduction of other novel materials, including plastics” (Keller 5-6). While the significance of any of these should not be underestimated, Lynn Keller’s *Recomposing Ecopoetics* introduces the “self-conscious Anthropocene” to emphasize the need for general human awareness to be the starting point; and in part as a response to the concern that the term *Anthropocene* might become “just another piece of trendy and vague green-speech” while the term deliberately includes humans in the environment and not separate from the world (5). Given ecopoetry’s recurring aloofness, taking this awareness into consideration is central.

Writing from within this self-conscious Anthropocene, identifying garbage or waste as a discrete subject matter is no longer feasible. The garbage-nature relationship has been transformed, or rather revealed; “[t]here is no longer an outside, a margin, an elsewhere, to dump the waste products of that labor and pretend this disorder that we make has gone away. That disorder now feeds back through the whole metabolism of the planet. It has done so for a while, it will keep doing so, in a sense, forever. There is no ‘environment’ or ‘nature’ that is separate. There is no ‘ecology’ that could be in balance

if we just withdrew from it” (Wark 2). We can no longer divide the world into separate systems of nature and civilization and garbage, and as a result the externalization of garbage— negligent or romantic or otherwise— becomes impossible. Garbage meets nature not as a new exciting aesthetic but in a catastrophic disruptive union.

This reunion of nature and other constructed spheres doesn’t simply indicate that there is a singular environment; “when you mention the environment, you bring it into the foreground. In other words, it stops being the environment. It stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us” and joins us in the foreground (Morton 1). One conceptual approach to accepting this is discarding our notion of “nature”— Not disregarding the so-called natural world of course but, on the most immediate pragmatic level, not othering nature by calling it “nature.” Getting rid of the term nature and the rhetoric surrounding the natural world allows us to more honestly confront it. Poetry of the Anthropocene calls this constructed nature into question and while it doesn’t reinvent the vocabulary it does work to identify the tendency to suppress what is inescapably part of the human sphere, to bring everything into the foreground. Consequently these poets leave the endless, eternal natural world to engage with their particular circumstances and places, to explore mortal and limited nature which is inseparable from the rest of their ecology. To be sure, this is not a localization of the pastoral or an alternate manifestation of “getting back” to nature. Timothy Morton describes this exodus from nature as the destruction of *space* and the simultaneous takeover of sheer *place*. There is no undesignated (“natural”) or empty space to escape to; we are in a sense trapped by place.

When Margaret Ronda asks how a “poem can speak for, to, with ecological phenomena” she moves significantly beyond “what are we to think of garbage,” putting

the poem explicitly in service of our environmental ecologies instead of adapting these ecologies, whether it may be beneficial or not, to poetics. *Remainders* approaches poetry explicitly with the Anthropocene in mind, seeking out a direct connection between waste or nature poetry and different aspects of global climate crises. She argues that much of this poetry has been out of sync and even conflicting with environmental politics but nevertheless offer unique relevant contributions in “their resistance to the emplotment and closures of narrative form, their speculative turn toward unimagined futures and recursive engagement with prior modes, and their attention to dynamics of persistence and decomposition” (5). She turns to poetry for nonargumentative, indirect “enigmatic” contributions, and she does so with the acknowledgement that poetry itself has a degree of obsolescence; “even if poetry remains a widespread cultural enterprise... it cannot be understood as possessing a sustained, meaningful influence on the wider spheres of American social and political life” (17). Poetry may continue to sustain “populist forms and myriad locales,” but it has nevertheless become a peripheral literature (17). This obsolescence grants poetry a suitability to explore the contemporary culture of material leftovers and the corresponding prevalent yet disrupted scientific narrative of the planet.

In order to make waste visible, the poetry must make the effects of waste visible— “believable enough to get our attention,” in order to “elaborate an ecocritical outlook that attends more fully to the forms and figures of ecological calamity rather than to narratives of sustainability and hope” (5). She’s looking for an eco-friendliness that may not be as comfortable to read, a sincerity which is driving and persistent. Ronda offers a critical response to the individualized and lazily philosophical spirit of Whitman’s “This Compost” which has been so pervasive.

The scope of *Remainders* is far beyond contemplating waste, material or otherwise— Ronda touches on the elusive nature of the empirical evidence for our dramatically shifting ecologies; contemporary counterculture movements in response to capitalism; reframing the human relationship with the world; and aspects of the global ecological crises in the twenty-first century. *Remainders* seeks out an equally comprehensive sense of accountability, for “a poem [to] make loss and extinction visible, or register new, disturbing presences, such as toxic sludge, oil spills, [or] dead zones” (1). She wants to move away from the Emersonian notion that through poetry “we can glimpse both the primal alterity of nature and also the most ingenious forms of its anthropogenic use, expressed through the poet’s imaginative symbols” (11). Nature, in other words, has long been fodder for human beings, poetic or otherwise. She acknowledges that “poems in this study remain powerfully influenced by this poetic sensibility,” a sort of undying colonialism of nature— but now, additionally, these poems “consider what happens when the figurative potential for natural renewal or refuge becomes no longer possible, and they meditate on this very unavailability, weighing the consequences for poetic thinking *without* this framework” (11). This call for the visibility of “presences” differs from previous texts’ use of waste aesthetics or calling attention to the peripheral or marginalized via waste, as well as overt moralizing. She articulates a poetics which works to “emphasize forms of complicity in environmental destruction and convey collective feelings of vulnerability, hopelessness, and dread. They replace jeremiads of imminent apocalypse with an uncanny sense of living on amidst accumulating planetary disruption, and they mourn the loss of a belief in nature’s rejuvenating powers” (6). Ronda is talking about a poem pointing primarily and

ultimately outward rather than back on itself, poetry which would be inextricably and legibly connected to its material subject matter, often scaling back or subverting anthropocentric tendencies which bring it all back to the self or civilization.

Poetry centered on garbage has struggled to stay in sync with the culture's increasing sense of urgency over humankind's effects on the climate and environment. In the Anthropocene, we begin to see poetry's garbage hooking into the larger systems at play. The narrative of garbage often rewinds, leaves the landfill, and returns to civilization; and only after this do we see it within the larger. No longer lying around in nature, garbage (before it categorically becomes garbage) persisting in the human world pushes poetry to a new place. This timeline of poetry and garbage embodies the human reaction to the ever-elusive but all-encompassing climate change: until you see it, or really feel it, next to you in your own territory, it can be tremendously difficult to face or even approach. Slavoj Žižek describes the often-misleading nature of our immediate experience: "We know it, but we don't really accept it, we don't really believe it...we don't in our guts really believe" in global warming, "then you go out and see the sun, the wind, the trees—my God, can this really change, it cannot." Garbage or nature poetry of the Anthropocene tries to re-orient our gut to something that isn't right in front of us, or to show that in fact it is.

In 2006, Hawkins wrote in *The Ethics of Waste* that "waste rather than nature is the motivation for new actions," but following the arc of garbage in poetry this does not appear to be the case (133). We learned that landfills don't tell the story, that the junk on the side of the road doesn't tell the story. While garbage may have transplanted nature as a new immersive frontier for contemplation and exploration, — even redemption—

garbage has not taken on or been attributed the characteristics or behavior of an ecology. Throughout much poetry in the twentieth century, material garbage has been treated as a monolithic aberration— destructive to be sure, more as a singular blight on the landscape than an insidious and pervasive system. Garbage turned metaphor has been an underdog, a means of trying to bring visibility to a number of issues or identities or politics, but never garbage as just garbage. As poets of the Anthropocene begin to explore environmental destruction while “[r]esisting a perspective of innocence or ethical outrage that would suggest an observational, distanced vantage,” garbage, rather than displacing nature, begins to merge with it. Anthropocene poetry works to internalize the elusive reality of large scale, human-made environmental change. Within Margaret Ronda’s landscape of ecology and accountability I focus my attention still on the poet’s approach and direct connection to material garbage. Coming face to face with the Anthropocene, how is garbage made visible? What sort of voice or agency is given to or on behalf of garbage? What else does garbage hook in to? And while the Anthropocene and the subversion of nature as a concept may seem nonintuitive and heady, it’s worth noting that these poets establish a more visceral and affective connection with the reader as nature and civilization uncomfortably dissolve into each other.

Tommy Pico’s Global-Emotional Narrative

Tommy Pico is a young, queer poet from the Viejas Indian reservation; his trilogy of long poems— *IRL* (2016), *Nature Poem* (2017), and *Junk* (2018)— reflects on his conflicted relationship with canonical poetry as much as it catalogues everything in pop culture he loves, hates, or finds sexually charged. Pico calls *Junk* a kind of sequel to Ammons’s

Garbage, although *Junk* does not talk about material garbage very much. Like *Garbage*, it walks us through an open-ended and sometimes uncertain personal-philosophical world; in place of an old man in his house we have a young man out and about, and incidentally fornicating with a lot of people. The metaphors of junk Pico tears through are far from romanticized, so he isn't sustaining any notion of junk as the underappreciated marginalized waste. *Junk* includes the familiarly spiritual trash which "gets a bad rap because capitalism Junk isn't garbage It's not outlived its purpose— Junk awaits its next life..." (3). Junk, both producing and discarding it, is an emblem of social standing and privilege; Pico recalls "I'm from a place where ppl became garbage A pile to remove Junk is an upgrade Poverty is like this: you keep everything until the wheels fall off and then you eat the wheels..." (47). Junk takes on some more unusual properties, as "discovery and anchor," a statement which is promptly corrected with "*no dummy discovery is too colonial*" (14). Junk is as personally intimate as it is abstractly political; "[j]unk is letting go, partly Junk is letting go of you Junk finds a new boo"—and junk is also, of course, genitals (72).

The poem itself suggests its relationship with and difference from *Garbage*, jumping on from a paraphrase: "Junk has 2 b the poem of our time Pointless accumulation / Clinging to a million denials Why do you need an assault rifle? / *What if radioactive bears* Buying in bulk Afraid of forgetting / that party in 2007 when Chantel shouted JAMIROQUAI IS HOLDING THIS PARTY TOGETHER!!!! Junk is the garbage ppl / keep" (65). Junk rather than garbage has to be the poem of our time, but more interestingly Pico has abbreviated "to" and "be" in the matter of informational texted or digital conversation which adds a rushed or urgent feeling to Ammons's fairly

calm tone. And he carries the momentum through to gun culture and consumerism and how what we have, material or immaterial, stubbornly remains part of our identity— in a crescendo of italics, all caps, and terminal punctuation. The entirety of the poem is written in Ammons's two line stanzas, but Pico leaves out the colons; instead of an associative procession of thoughts, *Junk* speeds through and smashes everything together.

Like Ammons, Pico moves through his own world with waste in mind, but whereas Ammons wanders it feels like Pico is running and jumping the whole way. Other than a mere difference in personality or persona, *Junk* brings a passion; sometimes reflective, sometimes frantic, but always energized and in the moment. *Junk* encompasses without directly addressing a garbage or ecological crisis, but it does so not with a sublime appreciation but a wild variety of emotional qualities; petty, ecstatic, impulsive irritation, profound anger, superficial but not vapid. Pico might be telling us this is how we *ought* to feel about our contemporary junked up world; why wouldn't we?

While the junk of *Junk* is of an introspective and social nature, in *Nature Poem* Pico establishes an ecology for the Anthropocene as he explores the particularities of his own complex relationship with nature. As an NDN (Indian) he suggests he is expected to have a special relationship with nature, and he also states that he can't stand NDNs who write about nature. He is also aware that nature, like his ancestral indigenous people, was colonized and commodified and, like nature, he doesn't have much recourse or resources to respond. He avoids sentimentality— spits in its face, really— but he does have a solemn affinity with a pre-Western, precolonial landscape. Similarly, as a poet, he is expected both to innovate (discover, colonize) and write a familiar, heartfelt

contemplation of nature. He recognizes this pattern and it doesn't resonate with him, but he also feels a touch drawn to it, slightly tempted.

"[F]uck beauty," Pico says in an interview talking about writing his book-length nature poem, *Nature Poem*. While it comes across as flippant or snarky— which it is— more than that he speaks to an age of new priorities in which poetry finding beauty everywhere, in nature or in garbage, is simply beside the point. And in a self-reflexivity or self-consciousness which often comes with these Anthropocene writers, his poem isn't about being in nature but about writing (or not writing) about nature. "Fuck beauty" is the poetic sass of Pico challenging poetry's relationship with its subject matter and trying to push it somewhere new.

It's worth noting that *Nature Poem* approaches material garbage while *Junk*, the third book of Pico's trilogy, deals with a variety of metaphorical junks but rarely the material kind. Junk for Pico is clutter, excess, sometimes garbage, more broadly the culture that turns things into garbage that are just fine. This reflects a particular hang-up of a lot of waste poetry: the emphasis rests on what *shouldn't* be thrown out, what *doesn't have to be garbage*, and the subsequent impulse to rescue or pull everything from the dump and put it back into the world to restore or rejuvenate its functionality. Pico notes that *Junk* was inspired by Ammons's *Garbage*, and although I hesitate to take his comment and run with it, *Junk* reads more like a personal rendition of *Garbage* than it does an environmentally progressive work.

Pico explicitly identifies *Garbage* as an inspiration for *Junk*, but we can see Ammons just as much in *Nature Poem*. He creates a similar cosmic ecology expressed through his particular poetic persona. 9 "In order to talk about a hurricane, you first have

to talk about a preexisting disturbance over the ocean...the networks of universe and the Big Bang.” His cosmic scope is reminiscent of *Garbage*, with the key difference that in Pico’s world ecology you “*have to talk about*” the events and circumstances together. While he and Ammons both create a sort of atmospheric persona— Ammons is retired and calm, Pico is on the prowl and worked up— Pico draws ultimately on worldly ecologies to create his world view. If Ammons is trying to figure out how he should go about writing his poem, Pico is purposefully resisting as he writes, “refus[ing] to be wooed by the nature poem he’s trying not to write” (Edelman)

Nature Poem doesn’t entirely pick apart the constructed conceptualization of nature but it does gesture toward Timothy Morton’s holistic ecology where nature and civilization are not necessarily distinct and how this is and has been a critical problem. The premise is the poem is “I can’t write a nature poem / bc it’s fodder for the noble savage / narrative,” and also, “I can’t write a nature poem / bc I only fuck with the city” (2, 4). He refuses to put forward a narrative which romanticizes nature, and everything that comes with romanticizing nature— namely, people. This manifests early on in some light-hearted comparisons; “Dragonflies experience a kind of quantum time, see a much richer spectrum of colors like a range of snowcapped mountains on molly and mushrooms and sherbet watercolors / And I’m supposed to believe *we’re* such miracles?” (7). While a bit whimsical, this comparison highlights the unimaginable extent of experience inaccessible to humans, that insects have knowledge of the world which escape our grasp.

Beyond isolated examples, *Nature Poem* works more to recognize the concrete, systemic dangers of separate nature from civilization. “[I]t seems foolish to discuss

nature w/o talking about endemic poverty which seems foolish to discuss w/o talking about corporations given human agency which seems foolish to discuss w/o talking about colonialism which seems foolish to discuss w/o talking about misogyny” (12). Without working as anthropocentric or deliberately not, Pico “doesn’t” write a particular kind of nature poem so he can focus on a broad sustainability, including social. Blunt insensitivity and violence is a recurring theme in *Nature Poem*. “Ray Rice punches his girlfriend unconscious on camera and drags her out of the elevator, and I’m suppose to give a fuck about pesticides? / That’s not the kind of nature I would write a poem about” (7). Natural and social sustainability are not only metaphorically similar but perhaps inseparable, now and throughout history. “Men the monoliths in Mosul back to stone and dust. I’m devastated in the midst of Vicodin. *Thank god for colonialist plundering, right? At least some of these artifacts remain intact behind glass*, says History” (6). This mourning of imperial destruction and domination is not complete without its partner thought written in the same episode: “How do statues become more galvanizing than refugees / is not something I wd include in a nature poem” (6). Nature poems call for preservation and respect, but with *nature* as a sphere separate from *civilization*, this regard does not necessarily carry over to human beings, in fact going straight against them.

Beyond his aesthetic and poetic taste, as a self-identified “NDN” he has deeply personal reasons and historical momentum for not writing a nature poem.

Its hard to unhook the heavy marble Nature from the chain around yr neck when history is stolen like water.

Reclamation suggests social

capital

...

in just 20 years, from 1850 to 1870, the indigenous population fell by 60%

Look at all your family and friends

I am missing many cousins, have you seen them?

Anthropologists write “population decline” with the gentle implication of a drying

fog. “Recourse” suggests resources. People say *get over*. (60)

Drawing on both his personal heritage and the roots of the nation’s founding, he lays down the inseparability of romanticizing nature and the sentiment of returning to nature, with oppression and genocide. Something as fundamental as water was as political centuries ago as it is now; he can’t write a nature poem because appreciation of nature was stolen from him as a consequence in part of literal nature, land and water, was stolen from his ancestors. As he suggests with his wordplay on “recourse” and “resource,” trying to get the resources and even the appreciation requires social capital, or some systemic change which would allow him something measurable comparable to reclamation. His sharp attitude serves the poem well here; no one has seen his missing cousins, of course, they never existed, and this dramatically understated question highlights a foundational simplicity at stake: many of his ancestors were murdered. But the question can also work more earnestly, asking if we have known this history, if we have seen or do see what he is talking about.

Nature Poem isn’t only an angry and sarcastic refutation of the romantic in the name of some new, different contemporary values or aesthetics. If Pico’s persona feels like he is only sub/detracting and not adding, throughout the poem he cultivates a more,

albeit reluctantly, united sentiment— not quite to the level of universal balance Ammons had, but in a similar vein.

“My primary device is personification, says Nature. Do your associations consider my mercurial elements?”

Nature is kind of over my head

the speech sweeps inland is overtaking

Nature keeps wanting to hang out...” (22)

Not-so-subtly mocking the academic appropriation of nature, his overall aversion becomes simultaneously his attraction to nature, or nature’s inroad to his appeal. As he blows through the reasons he doesn’t want to write about nature— “I don’t like thinking abt nature bc nature makes me suspect there is a god”— nature in turn proves more flexible and amenable (23).

At face value, Pico shows his immediate, visceral dislike for tired-out nature tropes and also his sense of humor about being so passionately torn over it.

You can’t be an NDN person in today’s world

and write a nature poem. I swore to myself I would never write a nature poem.

Let’s be clear, I hate nature— hate its *guts*

I say to my audience. There is something smaller I say to myself:

I don’t hate nature at all. Places have thoughts— hills have backs that love being stroked by our eyes...

Fuck that. I recant. I slap myself. (67)

This back and forth with himself also shows that, just as nature and civilization blur together, nature and nature poetry as such can and perhaps should be split apart. To perceive nature, you can't simply circumnavigate cultural conceptions of it, you have to work through them. But since nature is inherently entangled with civilization, Pico also exhibits a passionate ambivalence about being a member of a culture which has not only created these tropes to begin with but has simultaneously stomped out the natural world, his people included. He demonstrates that you can't simply be a person who loves nature and writes a poem about it, or if you are, it's all entirely beside the point. It's not simply a matter of taste or appreciation. Identity, history, politics, life are all implicated.

But nature does find its way to him; we can occasionally catch what appears to be a genuine appreciation of, for instance, the “[m]onumental bow of ash overtaking hikers, for example—the cloud’s arms sweep down the mountainside / a gasp from the mouth of natural wonder, eyes peel toward the sky” (##). He writes this not as a long-awaited embrace of or resolution with nature but in passing, almost unconsciously. His active appreciation of nature doesn't come as what we would typically recognize as an appreciate for nature. “My friend Jesus works at a dispensary. In the waiting room, they have one of those ball lightning things. Plasma globe. Makes everyone feel like Storm. Whatever keeps stoners staring / is the only kind of nature I could bear” This sampling of nature places natural phenomena in the city and lays it out as hugely artificial, but it nevertheless maintains sense of connected awe. Not sublime, and not even transcendence really; Storm is a fantastical comic book character and you can't invoke her without knowing this. The transcendent or mystical sense is actively imagined, just as we actively imagine nature. He's also poking fun, of course, at the image of stoners staring at a

lightning toy but it's still a pleasant and nondestructive activity; in any case, we don't need to venture out and create an entirely separate sphere of existence and call it nature.

The final pages of the poem demonstrate his ambivalence toward nature and poetry and the intertwining of the two. He stumbles through a train of thought, asking "What if I really do feel connected to the land?... What if I said *sorry* under my breath when I sat on moss on the rock at the crick by myself" (72). He immediately rejects this possibility, or the mode of expression at least: "I would look like a freaking moron basket case / I get so disappointed by stupid NDNs writing their dumb nature poems like grow up faggots / I look this thought full in the face and want to throw myself into traffic" (72). The final line hinges on the ambiguity of which thought he refers to; he might reject the trope-ridden appreciation of nature which he's been trying to write away from, or he might reject his violent and vulgar disappointment as an extraneous overreaction which is preventing him from what could possibly be simply appreciation of nature, even if just for a moment. Ambiguity continues to the next page, which contains the single line: "Admit it. This is the poem you wanted all along" (73). Which poem, though; Did we want the salt of the earth NDN poem, or the poem, or the snarky and explosive poem? He may not know which poem would resonate more deeply with his readers, and he may not know which poem he actually wants to write. "It's hard to be anything / but a pessimist," he writes on the last page while he's "on a porch petting kitties and there is lavender in the air...The air is clear, and all across Instagram— peeps are posting pics of the sunset" (74). A fairly settled ending to a turbulent text, it seems Pico has found a way to appreciate nature or to challenge notions of appreciated it. This closing line contrasts an almost pastoral front porch sunset with social media and the

smart phone, both intensely criticized for disconnecting people from real life or authentic experiences.

Without choosing sides— Pico after all is experiencing both simultaneously— his final thought asks why appreciating nature through poetry is qualifiedly better than experience it through Instagram. Whether or not Pico “appreciates nature” is arguably beside the point; either way, nature—nature poetry, hating nature— has allowed him to articulate his conflicted and conflicting identities as a poet and an NDN.

Like Tommy Pico, other twenty-first century poets write in the vein of the Anthropocene, bringing nature and civilization together in one ecology. *Big Energy Poets* is a collection of such poets, many of whom also follow Latour’s spirit of catastrophism and deploy an emotionally charged individualized response as a means of drawing attention to the gravity and urgency of an experience that reaches far beyond them. For previous poets, garbage became the new nature, a separate world to enter and exit, reflect on and see our reflection in. In the Anthropocene, garbage merges with nature in a far more disruptive and concrete manner.

In “The Age of Plastic,” Craig Santos Perez gives us a contemplation of garbage accumulation far different from those works which meditate on one massive heap in the wilderness or a pile of garbage on the curb. Perez exhibits Ronda’s “sense of complicity” in trashing the planted pitted against a will to change, which is in turn pitted against the knowledge that system change is painfully, even dangerously, slow to come. “The Age of Plastic” jarringly intermingles the tenderness of new life with the undead existence of plastic.

Garbage haunts not from the landfill but from its incredible multifunctionality which permeates our daily lives. In the poem, the plastic never enters the landfill; thus it never leaves the city and continues to inhabit its centrality to life. It stays with us and even beyond, as “*the perfect creation / because it never dies,*” and the implied question here is, perfect for whom or what? Plastic is not externalized but woven intimately into the fabric of life, right from birth— the poem begins when “the doctor presses the plastic probe / onto my wife’s belly” (164). Plastic witness the birth of a child, and the birth of the poem, only to outlive at least the former; Perez ominously reminds us that “every plastic ever made / still exists, somewhere, today.” Even in the ocean, plastic is not remotely discarded but “*leaches estrogenic and toxic / chemicals, disrupts hormonal / and endocrine systems*” (164).

Plastic undeniably lends itself to life, from the ultrasound to feeding bottles to food preservation, clothing, and even bullet protection. But just as willingly it strangles life; “in the ocean, there exists three tons / of fish for every one ton of plastic” — and it “causes cancer, infertility, and miscarriage.” Put alongside human and ocean life, plastic grows into a sort of pandemic. And reflecting on his progeny, the speaker wishes his daughter was made of plastic “so that she, too, will survive / our wasteful hands” (165). Perez’s poem gives shape to garbage as a system of plastic, a parallel narrative beginning with birth and implicitly the death of us, “imperfect, decomposing things,” but not for the immortal plastic. Here, *we* are the accumulated decomposition— not the dump nor the compost pile— and plastic takes on a chilling agency overseeing our lives.

In spite of its sober rhetoric, “The Age of Plastic” avoids moralizing, didacticism, and complacency. The system at play here is not merely the continual utilization of

plastic but the unavoidability and necessity of it. Perez doesn't write abstractly about human nature's flaws and our compulsion to waste, but depicts the impossibility to not waste, using plastic's stark contrast with a newborn baby of all things. It doesn't simply take up space or lie discarded with potential use, but proximity is not part of the question anymore because it's simply everywhere, where we put it and where it went. And, at the bottom line, we aren't talking about an individual piece of plastic here or there but plastic as a pervasive material or essence and its particular effects. The particular relationship between human and plastic laid out in the poem is entirely dependent on human dependence on actual plastic— as obvious as that may sound, Stevens could have written "Man on the Dump" without ever having been to or seen a dump; and Ammons's more nuanced ecology was rooted in his distance and his not-knowing. At the end of the poem, as in the end of life, we are left with death and plastic.

Metta Sama's "Another way of looking at a blackbird" is a response to Stevens's "Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird" which we might read as a corrective or a twenty-first century re-rendering. Just as "Man on the Dump" was centered on the man and not the dump, Stevens's blackbird poem centers on the man's perceptions and not the birds themselves; the dump exists to be philosophized on, the birds exist to be perceived. Sama flips this inside out; looking "alongside Dupont Pkwy" she sees "fledgling magnolias / planted in an unneat row," which will "one day hide nylon / resin factories and the putrid smell / the developers hope will be absorbed / by thick green leaves" (195). She gives as a startlingly sinister picture of newly planted trees, complete with an unneatness to fabricate an organic look. Planting young trees is a gesture for the future, and here the future is grimly deceptive, not a wasted barren landscape but one of trees

and birds. The desirable trees masking the undesirable looks and smells also suggests the danger of eco-friendly rhetoric...

In the final lines she asks, “how can I look at these petalled trees / and the glittery wings of these so black / they’re blue birds in the South and not see / unmerciful white hands strangling them / branch by sorrowful branch” (196). The trees serve as a proxy for the fate of the birds; what she sees are birds in trees in front of a factory, but what she understands is the system that has created this scenario and subsequently how the scenario will play out. The “how” doubles as a response to Stevens— how can she look at this and only think about the birds and herself— and as an urgent question prefacing desired action. She might have intoned, how can I *only* look, how am I supposed to just sit here and watch this happen. Sama demonstrates the singleness of nature and civilization here; the trees won’t simply flourish alongside the factory, and not seeing the factory doesn’t mean it won’t impact its environment. Growing trees in front of a factory doesn’t create a balance between two spheres; we don’t see nature and factory but instead a single ecology. Finally, the racial correlations of the “white hands” killing the black birds underscores the complexity of the insidious system in play lying beneath what could just as easily be seen as a passing appreciation for some new trees. Just beneath the planted trees is the compulsion to control nature, and just beneath that as Tommy Pico suggests is the subjugation of other life too, animal or human.

Kaia Sand’s “tiny arctic ice” similarly explores an ecology intertwining nature and social justice, and also implicates the poet-observer in the disrupted landscape. “Inhale, exhale / 7 billion people breathing” the poem begins, but Sand brings together global places in claustrophobic connectivity (208). “Airplane air is hard to share / I

breathe in what you breathe out, stranger.” Unlike some of the twentieth century poems, Sand makes a simple adjustment from talking about garbage to no clearly identified audience and instead connects herself, as a person not specifically as a poet, to the listener by means of these massive disparities. This stranger is a grounding point for the poem, keeping the catalogue of labor and product— “Tantalum is mined by hand for cell phones / Sometimes children dig it— directed at a particular audience. “You touch what I discard,” “I touch what you assemble” indicates the speaker is of a particular privilege, both a party to and sympathetic to the unethical economic practices. “Bonfires burn motherboards into Agbobgloshie air / Sometimes children breathe it / And the fish diminish... You breathe in what I disregard, friend.” Calling this person friend who the speaker admittedly disregards highlights the absurd discrepancy between these two people sharing a planet, a discrepancy based largely on the space between them. The poem compresses the space of the ecology and puts these two into a bizarre conversation. The speaker appears to be soberly aware of the circumstances but still dares to call this person a friend; their tone sounds as though they are educating the listener but they might just as well be reminding themselves what is so easy to forget: the invisibility of this other person, their geographical displacement. The speaker’s knowledge of the system, their degrees of participation or complacency, and the politeness with which they address the listener all create an unresolved tension scaled down from the global to the interpersonal.

Linda Russo explores the subtle violences of overlapping spaces in “Going to Survey Walmart Construction from the Crest of Pioneer Hill.” The poem imagines a space with “a culture of interspecies inhabitation / conflicts resolved, powers balanced.”

The poem is carefully hopeful at best with no exploration of a solution as such but, as the title implies, an assessment of the problem. She (or “it”) “begins with walking, feet mucked by competing agendas / and a wish to speak as part and parcel / part of a history of embattlement / of space being filled” (185). Like Sama, she is writing from within a particular grounded place which in this case she is wishing were instead a space, unowned and decivilized.

we in our many vectors crisscross this space
pinned to each other with our kind human greeting
our open, generous, uncomplicated
beg for release
into an imagined space uncompromisingly ours alone
the pearless pear tree and what you learn by proximity
without which we implode. (186)

The “we” isn’t clearly stated; there is an occasional “she” mentioned, so it could be a companion, or any reader or kindred spirit; or as the “kind human greeting” suggests, strangers crossing paths wanting the same release. The pinning of people together stands in contrast to the space she describes which doesn’t (she imagines) bear the social or ecological weight of civilization.

In the spirit of ecofriendly marketing she includes a “Song for the Local,” with verses including well-worn sentiments like “Garden to fork” or “Resistant to Round-up” and a refrain repeating “*local-scale, local-scale crying*” and “*thinning the sprouts.*” The song doesn’t articulate a focused purpose or critique, but local farming and local markets don’t address the problems of corporate imperialism. Like Sama’s magnolia trees, the

local doesn't somehow balance out the corporate; they are all part of the same material ecology. Following this jingle she includes two drawings of "silhouettes of typical vegetation," captioned: "*If you are interested in restoring native Palouse Prairie vegetation on your land, you have a fascinating challenge in store / it can be very rewarding— / but it is also tricky to grow;*" 187-8). On its own this might seem innocuous or naive but given that it is sandwiched between her stroll over a corporate construction site, we can infer that the real trick isn't getting something to come up from the ground but preventing its destruction from above.

Each author in *Big Energy Poets* also supplies a piece of prose alongside their poetry which describes their poetics and process. Written as expository prose, these different modes of reinhabitation and rediscovery demonstrates a transparency of process and knowledge creation they seek to make visible in our global ecology. Rather than an explanation about how the environment works directly or advice on we need to do, this prose provides an explanation for how the poets themselves have approached poetry and how they imagine their own poetics works. The poetry looks outside of itself, or the poets direct us to outside of their poetry to help us think about not just what they've created but the catalyst for their creation. These explanations and understandings we could take to with us to their poems, or we could consider on their own more as individual perceptions and ideology than as something bound only to writing or reading poetry.

Linda Russo's poetics of "reinhabitation" goes hand in hand with her construction site reflection; she borrows this term from "ecologists to describe the process of becoming an inhabitant of one's own bioregion ('life-place') through knowledge of natural boundaries, watershed, plants and animals, indigenous human history...

Reinhabitation extends to restoring ecosystems damaged by human activities” (189). She subsequently acknowledges that this is not solution as such or universally applicable but wants to “creatively rework” the concept and bring her poetry close to the activity of inhabiting a bioregion. She questions the possibilities and limits of her craft— “How can a poetics serve life?... What does [a poem] risk overlooking in its rigidities?”—and embraces that she is “inexpert... [and] that makes me mobile— that makes me reach out and collaborate as a way of knowing” (191). Her task isn’t to make the environment work for her poetry or use her poetry to channel knowledge from other spheres; instead, while she certainly doesn’t turn away from the science of climate change and pollution, she focuses on creating knowledge more suitable to poetry. Reinhabitation certainly informs her poetry, but poetry aside she invites the reader to envision their own creative inhabitation.

With his own acute sense of place, Eric Magrane describes his poetic projects as “site-based practice” one of which, for example, involves a weekend residency at “a site that blends big science— climate and systems research— with tourism... a blend between creative practice, environmental fieldwork, and social science” (131). Scientific research is central to his poetry, not as information for him to convey but as a process to work within. His methodology is “based in immanence rather than transcendence”; the resulting texts “become collaborators themselves, re-configured & re-calibrated sites, interventions, actors, and encounters” (131-2). This ideology directly and deliberately contradicts the transformative poems of the twentieth century in which the poem and poet affected the site but seemed largely unaffected themselves, using the garbage site or

nature site as a means of anthropocentric reflection rather than immersing and hooking themselves into the site.

Connectivity and balance— within an ecology, not between— runs through these accompanying prose pieces. Anna Lena Phillips Bell describes her work as “reckoning with... how bodies inhabited by poetry inhabit their landscapes: how poetry changes the body and the land, and how land changes the body and the poetry” (112). Poetry doesn’t write *about* or *respond to* but instead inhabits; the conceptualization of the ecological site changes as well. Kate Schapira describes her poetry as “labor[ing] to make the softest, the most vulnerable, into a site of protection instead of a site of violence. It’s looking for a place to lean, to heave, our attention, our attention and our care... we have to listen... and act on what we hear” (222). Brought into the foreground, the environment becomes a mortal player rather than a static, unaffected backdrop. Joyelle McSweeney brings nature into the foreground as the “necropastoral,” the hidden evil twin that has always lurked behind a “defunct anachronistic, dead, imperial and imperialistic” pastoral. Not merely a reactive *antipastoral*, the necro pastoral is its own place, not so much a life after death but a death during life, arguing that this land of death place is really where we are living. It discards the “fantasy of a separated, rural peace,” working as “the toxic double of our eviscerating, flammable contemporary world” in which we have “destroyed the idea of the bordered or bounded body” (143). The necropastoral not only antagonizes the pastoral but demonstrates its falsity and “makes visible the fact that nothing is pure or natural, that mutation and evolution are inhuman technologies, that all political assertions of the natural and the pure are themselves moribund and counterfeit, infected, and rabid” (143). If poking the pastoral beehive isn’t enough, conceptual poetry in the Anthropocene

brings us antipastoral material-centered poetry which not unintentionally antagonizes the reader as well.

CHAPTER IV: CONFRONTING POETRY'S OWN MATERIALITY

Conceptual poetry at its core is “a literature of ideas,” as Thomas Ford phrases it, rather than one of creating a finely tuned final product (46). In its execution this dynamic has involved “the rigorous application of conceptual constraints or procedures to language,” creating a tension between the concept and the product or the product and the reader (46). As conceptual art focuses on the immediate process and rather than the (by)product, it seems particularly suited to address garbage. Ecopoetics— garbage poems, nature poems, by whatever name— opens up poetry on a fundamental, ideological level to help find its place within its ecology, to hook it into the system to give back. Conceptual poetry as ever keeps its gaze on its own composition and, regardless of accessibility, offers a unique perspective on the ethics of producing poetry— not writing it, but printing it into existence. In this sense, conceptual writing remains suspect as it “mobilizes writing procedures that allow concept and matter to read and write through each other but also to expose each other’s dependencies on planetary-scale material infrastructures and ecosystems” (Hume and Osborne 221). On the most fundamental level, though, you could argue any piece of art exposes this dependency if the audience is cognizant of it. Conceptual poetry self-consciously exhibits this dependency, and its neglect of the final product— an execution which for the most part equally exists in nonconceptual work— mimics on a literal level our contemporary throw-away culture. Some contemporary conceptual work brings together ecopoetics and the linguistic materiality of poetry, and

Kenneth Goldsmith stands out by giving us arguably the purest examples of poetry as garbage that exists.

Picking up where late twentieth century poetry was turning its gaze toward linguistic materiality, Michael Sloan's late twentieth century conception of "scrap poetics seeks to put matter back in materialism to map out a new territory in rubbish ecology."

(99) This comes in part as a response to an overreaching response to and conflation between consumerist materialism and materiality, a response which ends up "implicitly peddling an 'antimateriality'— as a result, "we run the risk of erroneously ignoring our material surroundings" (204). He works toward a much-needed straightforward link between garbage poetry and material garbage, shaping his poetics to "di[g] up detritus by dumpster diving for literal and figural trash in order to concurrently conceptualize and mobilize the aesthetics and politics of waste and waste's words" (86). It's still unclear where the literal dumpster diving comes in and the focal point seems to remain largely conceptual, although this conceptuality that draws our attention to the material. Sloan is "interested in garbage *as such*" but clarifies "most of my analysis takes up textual trash with the stipulation that it is inextricably tied to waste matter" (86, emphasis mine). The matter going back into materialism is really the words of the poems themselves, not as ethereal signifiers but as printed, physical, inky text. "Here we are asked to observe the real, 'the actual,' and as the tool 'tool' shapes 'scraper' into 'shaper,' we become acutely aware of not only the materiality of the text, the world, but also the way in which objects act and language is scattered *like scraps* in the surround" (89). Sloan explores this scattered language, a sort of ghost which in spite of its abstract characteristics still manipulates the physical world.

Scrap poetics brings the materiality of the poem-text into the forefront of the conversation, albeit with a less-than-direct connection to tangible waste. It still carries with it a star struck gaze as Sloan calls garbage “a gift” from the world, “one that can and should be responded to” (102). Notably though, Sloan leaves room for responses to move in any direction; “turning to trash in an alternative aesthetic register opens up opportunities for avant-garde approaches and tactics for reframing the self-waste relation, aberrant approaches that reproach the conventional idea that waste is worthless, no more, no less” (89). Sloan recognizes that the “rhetoric of eco-friendliness conceals the existence of trash,” and while he writes namely about corporate-speak here, the same could be said for poetry” (86). Scrap poetics tries not merely to reverse the vilification of waste but more broadly works to unpack its alleged simplicity which often stems from vilification. And while the praise for trash lingers, the divinity of the poet-transformer has been replaced with typographical play, the poet as marring or mixing or dissolving words on the page. Still in control, but the transcendence only goes a couple of feet above the page. Scrap poetics has one foot planted in the need to connect ecopoetics with the material waste which looms over us, and the other foot still shaking off the sentiment that garbage offers poetry a darling new aesthetic. While scrap poetics arguably remain as abstracted from material waste as conceptions of garbage that precede it, it draws important attention to the text’s materiality, or at least one aspect of it.

Lastly, Sloan articulates a “hermeneutics of sincerity” or “eco-sincerity” which “avoids elision and excision and vies for honestly recognizing the catalogue of that which is around” (90). This call for sincerity has surely resonated with other ecopoets, a sincerity which needs something more assertive than “rhetoric of eco-friendliness.” Sloan

draws on Ammons's *Garbage* to demonstrate this sincerity: "'garbage has to be the poem of our time because garbage is spiritual, *believable enough to get our attention*, getting in the way, piling up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and creamy white (18)'" (90-1, emphasis mine). There is surely a strong case for Ammons's sincerity, but I don't think we can say the same about the effectiveness of *Garbage* drawing our attention to garbage— or more specifically, insisting an undeniable, aggressive believability, one that I believe the Anthropocene poets call for. One artist, though, gives us an overwhelming "eco-sincerity" and attention to garbage that we never asked for.

Conceptual poetry at large introduces "one problem with the metaphor and procedure of textual recycling as analogous to material and biological recycling...textual recycling relies on the intrinsically reusable, reiterative properties of texts and language. In comparison, recycling plastic, for example, requires multiple machines, complicated engineering prowess, and outside energy sources..." (Hume and Osborne 218). A text like Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets* perfectly reuses words and lines and invokes recycling in a way traditional poetry doesn't, but ultimately remains detached; reusing a word is a lateral move while recycling downgrades materials which eventually become something unrecyclable and end up in the dump. "Linguistic recycling tells us very little about the process and details of recycling other forms of matter," and with this in mind we might perceive Berrigan's word cycle as perfectly unfeasible as the pastoral death-and-regeneration (219).

Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptual work results in far less accessible and comfortable final products. "In conceptual writing the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work" (1) So begins Kenneth Goldsmith's "Paragraphs on

Conceptual Writing,” and it serves as an entry point into conceptual writing and art in general. The sentence is deceptively simple and gestures toward art which works with a “preset” concept or plan is a “way of avoiding subjectivity” and the ego of the artist (1). As a result, “execution is a perfunctory affair...[t]he form itself is of very limited importance” (1). Goldsmith describes conceptual art as primarily illogical or irrational, partly in that “it doesn’t really have much to do with mathematics, philosophy, or any other mental discipline” and further that it “doesn’t really matter if the reader understands the concepts of the author by *reading the text*” (2, emphasis mine). Rather than the product or the text, the concept, which “is as much a work of art as any finished product,” is the focal point; and not simply the concept but “[a]ll intervening steps— sketches, drafts, failed attempts, versions, studies, thoughts, conversations— are of interest” (2).

This description is not Goldsmith’s own invention, and the short essay itself is a reiteration of Sol Lewitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1969). Goldsmith emphasizes the separation of concept and product in plainer terms and writes specifically about literature, but he echoes the same sentiments as Lewitt: “1. Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logical cannot reach... 4. Formal art is essential rational” (1). And later on in the list, “9. The concept and the idea are different. The former implies a general direction while the latter is the component. Ideas implement the concept” (2). Lewitt’s disjointed list of somewhat esoteric declarations are not as concrete and practice-oriented as Goldsmith’s, and while Lewitt writes almost nothing on considering or not considering the product, his emphatic and abstract description of what concepts and ideas are give us the same result: conceptual art prioritizes the concept first and foremost. Thomas Ford repeats this sentiment, writing

that conceptual poetry “calls for a thinkership rather than a readership” and that “it’s the thought that counts” rather than the text (Conceptual, Nonconceptual, and Postconceptual 47).

Goldsmith’s extended commentary on the need to neglect the product is not so much his own preference as it is an indication of the media available to artists in the twenty-first century. Jasper Bernes describes conceptual art as “about an encounter between old and new media; the writers registered and explored the characters of the new media environment through its effect on poetic form and the form of the book...” (“Flarf and Conceptual Poetry” 47). In the digital age, a primary task of the conceptual artist is to draw attention to the various media and conflated genres in this “new media environment” rather than producing a polished and seamless piece of art or writing. With Goldsmith this entails, in short, “show[ing] us what happens when one cultural apparatus collides with another, when the [printed] book slams into electronic media and the Internet” (Pound 319)— and when this collisions in turn enters an epoch of catastrophic possibilities.

Goldsmith’s conceptual work in literature, art, and even his classroom has one prominent recurrence: excess and waste. In the Anthropocene, “humans now seem at once vastly more significant and more insignificant than ever before [and] we are now challenged to understand the world at both much larger and much smaller scales”— Goldsmith takes this attention to and anxiety about scale to a whole new level. His most recent creative publication, *Capital*, is a 1000+ page iteration of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* in which Goldsmith (com)piles and categorizes quotes from a variety of sources, academic or otherwise, about New York City. One of his best known conceptual books,

Day, is nearly the same length and is a transcription into linear book form of the entire New York Times on a Friday of no particular importance in the year 2000— a transcription that includes not only articles but ads, page numbers, and every single word printed anywhere on the page with no effort to make or avoid making meaningful connections between any of the rewritten material.

During the summer of 2014, he executed a deliberately impossible project to print out the entire Internet— he accepted submissions (as well as hundreds of pages of protest), all of which he included in a gallery exhibit. This exhibit included 33 gigabytes of printed information, weighed over 10 tons, and if sorted into a single stack would be around 305 miles high (Sugarman 2-3). Here is the real man on the dump; the exhibit looks like a landfill with windows confined by drywall and appears to serve no purpose beyond demonstrating an impossibility through tremendous effort, or perhaps simply prompting the question of why.

He has also designed and taught a course at the University of Pennsylvania entitled “Wasting Time on the Internet” in which he implores his students to not think as hard as they can and to spend hours idly surfing the web (Waldman). “‘We don’t do much,’ Goldsmith shrugged, all dunce-cap apologies and haplessness. ‘Most of our experiments go nowhere’” (Waldman 5). “‘This is what happens...We just end up going down Wormholes. The whole class slides off the table.’” Waldman, who sat in on the class, relays her experience as essential being confused and online in a sort of hyperactive manner. She describes the class as Goldsmith’s “ideal...of a kind of hallucinatory immersion in the digital flow “or a “multi-week piece of performance art” (7), and throughout, Goldsmith refuses to give explicit clarification or meaning— it is in a sense

an entire course dedicated to processing and acting out a concept without much regard for the product. The redeeming qualities of the course in Waldman's piece remain appropriately unresolved and unclear, at least in any traditional sense. But one thing is clear throughout his recent career, especially in literature: Goldsmith has been wasting a whole lot of time and material and not making it clear exactly why.

"Eco-sincerity" so far may hardly seem applicable to Goldsmith, but it begins to emerge when he tells us how to read his works. With *Day*, he follows his notion of "uncreative writing" and expresses his interest in creating a "vast amount of 'nutritionless' language" and asks the reader to "imagine a book that is written with the intention of not being read. The book as object: conceptual writing; we're happy that the idea exists without ever having to read the book" ("Uncreativity"). And yet, given his emphasis on the importance of the concept and not the product, Goldsmith has a particularly heavy reliance on the material, the printed page.

It's worth noting that Goldsmith hasn't always been an artist of excess; it isn't something he takes for granted or accidentally fell into. In an interview with Marjorie Perloff, he recounts his days as a gallery artist where he would handcraft wooden books, "exquisitely carved plywood structures," for display. Eventually, he was "bothered by the fact that the idea of what to put on the books came in a flash, but then the execution could take up to several months," and decided he was more interested in "words on the objects" rather than "objects themselves." His solution was to *reduce the excesses of process time and materiality* by "simply putting words on large pieces of paper" (Perloff 8, emphasis mine). This economical move suggests that Goldsmith doesn't approach conceptual art or writing as inherently excessively material; and it seems quite the opposite as he

transitioned from conceptual art to conceptual writing. And while his mass printing projects and extensive copying and cataloging are anything but eco-friendly, he is rather up front about his lack of concern for deliberately excessive printing, his lackluster attitude toward following through on execution of his own ideas, and the (un)worthiness of simply reading his texts.

Critical responses to Goldsmith's literature always acknowledge his waste or excessive materiality, but mentioning it only in passing. They focus instead on his ideas and concepts that created the work in the first place— ostensibly, according to the fundamentals of approaching conceptual art, in order to address the process and ideas that lead to the creation of the works rather than the “perfunctory execution,” the books themselves. What I hope to demonstrate by reviewing several studies of Goldsmith's literature is that these critics are reading Goldsmith hermeneutically or aesthetically, creating abstract meanings from the text themselves, texts Goldsmith says we don't need to read, texts that are meant to be, and are quite, unreadable. While critics should certainly not be bound to follow the author's instructions on how to read their texts, performing a more traditional textual analysis on Goldsmith's texts, always categorized as conceptual, is not treating it as such; as a result, we are missing out on an entire trajectory of study especially given the less than self-evident nature of Goldsmith's transcription work.

In *Poetics of Waste*, Christopher Schmidt focuses on the fact that “Goldsmith engages the excess and detritus of the twentieth-century information ecology as a field for appropriation; but whether Goldsmith's management of this information is meant to avoid waste or produce yet more waste is unclear” (217). To situate his inquiry, Schmidt

expounds on the “mysterious charisma of waste,” that what was once generally thought to be homogenously useless marginalia can actually allow for a number of important advances if we stop vilifying waste and begin to appreciate its position (xii). Schmidt utilizes the marginal position of this excessive waste as a means of exploring queerness: “Uniting materialist and queer theoretical approaches, I suggest that Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler, Goldsmith and others have developed a waste management poetics in response to ideologies that phobically associate mass culture...with female and queer bodies” (4-5). Waste is redeemed through metaphors of the Other and of queerness. Schmidt considers waste as the first half of a metaphor that allows us to conceptualize it as “civilization’s other” with “an ability to disrupt and trouble the stability of culture itself when it is not able to be repressed” (16). Material waste and ideologies or identities which mainstream culture rejects become intertwined, and waste becomes an abstract device enabling productive interruption and liberation.

Schmidt ultimately hopes that “in making music out of the goods and garbage of the system” writers like Goldsmith, who he describes throughout as a “waste manager,” can use their poetry to “suggest a ‘corrective’ that might make the genre— if not a form of resistance— at least an incisive measure of the capitalist damage and waste” (159). But Schmidt also sees fundamental contradictions in Goldsmith’s program for conceptual art and his execution—namely, his supposed allegiance to the digital but continued work with print. “[I]f Goldsmith truly privileged the concept of his works above their materialization, if he believed they need only be thought and not read, why then offer impassioned public readings of the language within his books rather than the one-sentence precis describing them? Why indeed publish them at all?” (131). He even asks

Goldsmith himself “whether publishing his in texts digital-only formats wouldn’t show more fidelity to his project’s premises” (36). This tension between the digital and the print remains unresolved in Schmidt’s studies. Schmidt notes that this “urge would seem to betray the ecological import of his own imperiously voiced artist’s statement,” an urge that results in “voluminous books [which] are all too material—wasteful—in their flurry of pages, their blizzard of words” (37). However, this material concern is soon abstracted; this open engagement of real world waste becomes “a desublimation characteristic of postmodernism that seems just now to be gaining currency in poetry” (37). Goldsmith’s material waste is noted but treated as a byproduct or beside the point, and ultimately remains something for interpretations of his texts to simply rest on— and to cover up.

Joshua Schuster’s “On Kenneth Goldsmith: The Avant-Garde at a Standstill” demonstrates a similarly brief treatment of the waste beneath Goldsmith’s concepts. He describes Goldsmith’s *Weather*, a book not unlike *Day* and consisting entirely of one year’s worth of transcribed radio weather forecasts, as “composed of haunting prose copied from the slow crawl of an atmospheric ecosystem unfolding...made all the more melancholica in the face of the fact that a massive paper book always implies a ripping out of plant life” (24). The ripping out to create material excess and waste, though, is not the final point; Schuster implores we “[r]eturn to Debord’s critical concept of spectacle, which he defines as ‘capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image’” (24). Schuster continues to explore the entanglement of materiality and concept, suggesting that “we could describe Goldsmith’s books as language accumulated to the point where it becomes image. *Day* is exactly this unit of capital accumulated as image in the block of a book” (6-7). The “image of a block of a book” is an interesting phrase, rather than simply

“a block of a book” which would prioritize the book as a material chunk rather than an abstract image. Working from within this image of a block, Schuster tells us that “[b]y including the text of ads and all the marginalia of newspaper operations in the same flow of writing, Goldsmith provokes a reading that does not distinguish between capital and content, administration and meaning” (7). Schuster’s noted concern of the violence and waste of plants being ripped out of the ground to create these books is quickly subordinated in order to consider the book instead primarily as an image.

Scott Pound’s “Poetics of Information” focuses on Goldsmith in terms of media and doesn’t perceive any print / digital conflict. In fact he describes Goldsmith’s approach to composition in different media that invokes speech and information not as a muddled relationship between manifesto and text but rather an enlightening, almost prophetic, investigation into the future interactions between print culture and the world of the digital and the Internet. He considers Goldsmith’s works in terms of “information management,” as writer who “jettisons...a rigorous mode of critical and interpretive engagement” and focuses exclusively instead on “an informational conceit: the idea of capturing and repurposing used language in texts that make a spectacle of their own unreadability,” used language that is in “endless streams...right under our noses as information” (317-8). It is a lovely coincidence that an archaic form of management means to be deceitful or tricky. Goldsmith as information manager is reminiscent of Goldsmith playing the part of a waste manager, although Pound argues for a more complex relation between Goldsmith’s conceptions of paper and digital media: “His work is not an attempt to champion digital media as a newer or better cultural platform. His orientation toward digital media is neither progressive nor instrumental. He does not

make electronic literature,” and he “embraces, rather than excludes, print literacy” (318). The big picture of Goldsmith’s poetics as noted above “shows us what happens when one cultural apparatus collides with another, when the book slams into electronic media and then the Internet” (319).

Pound addresses the digital and paper media and information, but only in abstraction— he hovers near but never lands on how to think of Goldsmith’s actual material books slamming onto our desks or into a garbage bin. At times his consideration of Goldsmith’s multimedia resources seem to pull him away from their material groundings: “To see Goldsmith’s work purely as writing leaves unexplained his obsession with archiving speech,” or as he puts it, “speech material,” an ironic name as this material is entirely ephemeral, captured in Goldsmith’s all too tangible texts.

For Pound in the end, Goldsmith’s books, “*their size notwithstanding*, are miniatures of a new cultural ecology in which language-cum-information endlessly flows: abundant, redundant, cheap, and fertile. By presenting a cultural condition in which authorship equals information management, writing equals speech, and reading is browsing, Goldsmith offers a bracing but accurate image of the contemporary media-culture nexus” (328, emphasis mine). In a study of Goldsmith’s paper publications colliding with the digital or information age, the paper publications themselves in all their excess are bracketed by the briefest phrase, “*their size notwithstanding*.” The material resources required for those very media are hidden behind the concept. Goldsmith’s materiality is always noted but treated more as an inconvenience or passable contradiction; his excess and waste in his conceptual literature is noted and then rather quickly footnoted.

Strangely enough, sticking to Goldsmith's conceptuality, which by definition subordinates the finished product, may be a productive way of approaching his materiality. Each of these studies describe accounts of Goldsmith's ambitiously large and inaccessible texts; but in spite of their identification of Goldsmith as a conceptual poet, I argue these critical responses depart from conceptuality from the onset. They do so by performing a textual close reading in order to *create meaning out of writing* in a text which is founded on de-emphasizing the product as much as possible and focusing on the concept and the trajectory it follows up to the point of production. As a result, half of the conceptual product—the printed book, the materiality—is ignored while the other aspect, the written words as readable text, are generously attended to. Rather than considering his concept with as much weight as Goldsmith, these critical readings consider the concept and how it produces an unreadable conceptual text, which they then read and create meaning from, rendering it readable and prioritizing the metaphorical finished product. I propose to take Goldsmith at his word—at least in this particular case where it's fairly clear—that the texts are not meant to be or don't need to be read but rather the concepts that produced the texts are to be considered.

Brian Cooney's "Nothing is Left Out" is one such nonconceptual reading of Goldsmith's *Sports*, another extensive, uncreative and nutritionless book in the same vein as *Day* and *Weather*. Cooney notes in *Sports* the absence of pauses and the subsequent leveling of information delivery, an observation we could just as well apply to *Day*, in which ads, articles, headlines and page numbers are all indiscriminately strung together. For Cooney, "in the case of Goldsmith's works, nothing is allowed to stand out; all words are equal, and, thus, neutral. This visual neutrality creates a form of tonal flatness by

erasing any distinction between the event of the game and the inessential” (28). Accordingly, Goldsmith’s flat all-inclusiveness leaves “nothing” out in two important ways: it lays everything out indiscriminately, and it also leaves out the lacks, the nothings— the meaningful spaces and pauses that supply just as much meaning as the content. Following this, Cooney focuses on the ways in which “playing with and querying commodity culture and the way that culture creeps into everyday language. If the essence of commodity is speed, then the vertiginous barrage of advertising, commentary, and blather is perhaps the greatest symptom of its intrusion into language. Goldsmith’s erasure of the silences and pauses in *Sports* takes that intrusion all the way to its natural conclusion” (31). While he doesn’t treat the text directly as an interpretable lyric or narrative, his textual analysis approaches it with more traditional hermeneutics. Cooney’s attention to white space, information design and tone barely touch the content of *Sports*, but he nevertheless abstracts and thus prioritizes the text— from which he pulls explorations and experimentation with speed and commodity culture— rather than attending strictly to the concept. And it’s worth noting that for all his attention to the visuality of language, the arrangement of the words on a printed, physical page is still not addressed.

Other critical readings have followed this pattern: they identify Goldsmith as a conceptual artist, acknowledge without particular emphasis his massive print publications, and finally create productive, sometimes redemptive, metaphors of waste— that deal with queerness in the case of Schmidt, information in the case of Pound, capital in the case of Schuster— but the material waste itself, the books, remain ironically in the ethers. Brian Cooney, whose description of *Day* avoids any sort of textual reading,

nevertheless manages to turn Goldsmith's project into a useful metaphor: he tells us that Goldsmith "cheats" with his computer-assisted text, which in turn "lays bare the fallacy that the author can easily exit the logic of global capitalism" (75). Like other textual readings, this one steers us away from the material waste that is Goldsmith's published books and gives us a productive interpretation instead.

I want to draw a hard line between conceptual reading and textual analysis— not simply to follow the rules of conceptual art, but because Goldsmith's concepts end up leading us to his physical publications, the final executed products, *as* wasted, excessive materiality. If we follow his word and the general program of conceptual art, and consider his concepts and neglect to make any meaning out of the thousands of pages of produced text, I argue that the material finished product, which we are supposed to ignore, comes into glaring relief, dramatically outweighing the concept. One of the fundamental problems surrounding garbage is that it is neglected. To demonstrate this rather counterintuitive move from conceptuality to materiality, I focus on *Day*, arguably one of his most unreadable books, and *Capital*, his most recent creative publication that allegedly departs from boredom and unreadability.

In "Being Boring," Goldsmith begins his detailed discussion of *Day* by telling the reader "I retyped a day's copy of the New York Times and published it as a 900-page book. Now you know what I do without ever having to read a word of it" (2). It's easy to imagine already why the book would be considered unreadable, but that's not the same thing as needing to read it anyway. Goldsmith goes into detail about what he claims is important for conceptual work: the process and experience of producing the text. He lays out his methodology clearly, where he would "take a page of the newspaper, start at the

upper left hand corner and work my way through” (3). This mundane methodology leads to a richer experience than we might expect; he tells us “the object of the project was to be as uncreative in the process as possible. It was one of the harder constraints a writer can muster, particularly on a project of this scale” (3). As a result of this struggle to withhold creativity, and perhaps also just to expedite things, his writing process includes both “retyping and OCR’ing” (what Cooney describes above as “cheating”).

As an experience, Goldsmith tells us it was “the most fascinating writing process” he’d ever had; it was “surprisingly sensual” and he compares the process of “moving the text from one place to another” as becoming as physical as sculpting, and even that it felt “sexy” (3). The process became “a wild sort of obsession” in reshaping an entire newspaper by typing it on a digital screen: “I felt like I was taking the newspaper, giving it a good shake, and watching as the letters tumbled off the page into a big pile, transforming the static language that was glued to the page into moveable type (3). He describes the process as feeling “good” and there was “something so satisfying about this exercise” that he went on to retype other printed media just to see how it felt, to see how it would compare.

Two things stand out as Goldsmith recaps his conceptualization and process for us. The first is that he talks extensively about his own feelings, about how the act itself of retyping the newspaper affecting him psychologically and emotionally— this appears to be a major part of his drive to finish the project. In contrast, he later retyped an issue of *Newsweek*, and his only words on this entire process are that the “project definitely fell on the boring side of boring” (3). Feeling only an unintriguing boredom, he didn’t publish it, he doesn’t tell us anything about it. The second thing follows the first and is perhaps

more important in situating his work among contemporary media. Part of the rush of excitement came from the transformation of media, from retyping text that is static and glued to the page and “forc[ing] it into *the fluid medium of the digital*” (3, emphasis mine). The vigor and emotional energy he pours into his execution is not unlike the Anthropocene poet’s visceral sense of urgency, although the focal points are complete opposites.

The concept of *Day* rests on Goldsmith’s personal investment, his affective response to his project as he works on it; even the different media he works with are couched within terms of his own affective state. He isn’t working with larger scale values or ramifications of paper and digital media, which is what the critical readings work to derive from reading the finished product. Conversely, nowhere in his published text do we get a sense of a personal experience of media (quite the opposite in fact), nor do we see the digital playing a particular role since in the end we are left with the same sort of static, glued text that Goldsmith started with.

I look to Goldsmith’s own description of his project not to prioritize the author’s intention or to find a singular true way of dealing with his text. Rather, his account of writing *Day* fills the gap that all of the critical readings have consciously or unconsciously pointed to— the fact of the material book, the problem of the 900-page printed thing that seems to contradict Goldsmith’s investigation of different media, or more broadly, the simply baffling fact of the excessively long books. Only with his own account is this contradiction somewhat resolved: by definition, his project as conceptual focuses on the process and not the product. But this conceptual process is an individual, personalized experience of media considered only within the context of a singular ego,

neglecting to consider any other values or contexts of media, particularly the material. Both the concept and the personal experience result in material waste that is in and of itself divorced from the concept and the personal experience. Goldsmith's project when treated as conceptual doesn't give us a particularly nuanced investigation into what happens when print culture slams into digital and the Internet. Rather, it gives us a hyperindividualized, narrow and fairly simple account of someone producing a lot of waste because it feels good. His choice to publish as a printed book rather than an e-book is a result of this same impulse: when confronted with his own apparent contradiction of valuing the digital but producing print, he tells Schmidt he did so because, in Schmidt's words, "he possessed a recalcitrant desire to see his work in codex form" (36). In other words: he felt like it.

This is what we get from a conceptual reading of *Day*. Not a conscientious engagement of print and digital culture; not a redemption, investigation into, or even a rationalization of waste via 900 pages of retyped newspaper. It's difficult even to give much credence Goldsmith's rereading of the newspaper which he tells us "you haven't really read" after the typical 20-minute morning browse, because *he hasn't really read it either* since he OCR'd parts of his project. He isn't a "waste manager" or "information manager" in any redemptive sense; he much more of a waste mismanager, a waste *producer* in fact. If we set aside the textual readings, we are left with a paper-thin concept and a tremendous amount of paper because it *felt good at the time to one guy*. From here there is only one thing left to consider: the material book itself as bluntly excessive and wholly unnecessary, and yet very real; a materiality that outweighs the conceptuality. Goldsmith's project, conceptually and experientially separated from the material

execution, inevitably leads us directly to a consideration of its material execution. His project demonstrates that, for both writer and reader, by looking closely enough at a page we look right through it and bury its materiality, caught up either in our own experience or our own abstracted meanings of the text.

Day's conceptual materiality, combined with Goldsmith's arbitrary or impulsive desires for how to proceed with its execution, seems to speak against much of the twentieth century embrace of waste in art. The apparent superfluity of Goldsmith's entire process raises the question of what is beneficial about ushering garbage into the arts. The subjective impetus behind *Day* brings himself as the artist to the forefront and allows us to question the man behind the garbage, as it were, in those twentieth century works which consolidated on some level garbage and waste with celebration and optimism, or at the very least, balance.

The execution of *Day* is tremendously wasteful, but this is not an isolated or anomalous event in poetry, as I argue *Capital* shows us. These texts are both monumental and quotidian at the same time. *Capital*, according to an interview with Goldsmith, is a text of a new phase in his literary career. After *Day*, he wanted to find "hotter and more emotional texts" as he had become "bored of being boring" (Moss). He describes the book as "a completely romantic love letter to the city" and a "love song to New York" which, after 40 years, he stills finds "intriguing, mysterious and sexy" (Moss). While Goldsmith explains that "the process is identical: this book is nearly 1000 pages long but I haven't written a word of it," the concept of the book is notably different from his previous transcriptions. It's inspired by Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* which caught Goldsmith's attention as both an entirely cited but entirely sensual book that "told what

the city felt like, sounded like, and smelled like, instead of narrating official histories” (Moss). While we have another book Goldsmith hasn’t written a word of, it is not only based on a borrowed and more purposeful book, but on a book that is more purposefully readable, enjoyable, meaningful.

Capital is potentially these things as well. Goldsmith’s interviewer, Jeremiah Moss, tells him “I’ve been enjoying *Capital*” and that it “is not boring” which as bland as it sounds is indeed a departure from the reading experience of *Day* (or *Weather* or *Sports*). A *Guardian* review describes the book as “a monumental, admirable undertaking: a richer, more surprising, frankly more readable book than Goldsmith’s blank conceptual gambit seems to promise” (Dillon). And the composition and arrangement of *Capital* lends itself to readability; it is deliberately organized into 52 different sections based on various themes, and within these sections, Goldsmith cites a number of different writers and different kinds of sources, from academic to Wikipedia. It has what *Day* doesn’t: dimension and a variety of voices, room to breathe, deliberate rather than erased browsability, and even a possibility for larger cultural relevance or connection.

However, I want to situate this impulse to describe the book as readable or meaningful deliberately as a follow-up to descriptions of *Day* which, in its agreed-upon unreadability, has in the end pointed to its own pointless and wasteful existence. If *Capital* departs from *Day* as an accessible and diverse text, it is worth investigating whether or not it departs from *Day* in terms of material excess and waste, whether its readability justifies its materiality— it is after all about 100 pages longer than *Day*.

I argue essentially that *Capital* is not readable in any meaningful way; that is, just like *Day*, the final printed text and the meanings we might extrapolate from it are entirely separate from its conceptualization and thus not materially necessary for the concept to thrive. *Capital* invokes the concept of readability but its text takes us no further than the text of *Day*. Just like *Day*, Goldsmith's comments about the process of writing *Capital* are largely personal—it is a love letter, it is a personal romance with the city. While his review opens and closes with praise, in between Dillon notes however the “frustratingly slapdash” method in which Goldsmith, for instance, “fails to note when he is quoting one writer quoting another,” or the noticeably heavy reliance on certain sources. He notes too that Goldsmith has “simply ignored certain essential voices” in favor for more personal arbitrary persons to focus on. And the book perhaps is not a holistic encompassment of sources about NYC but also, as Dillon notes, “it seems to lead straight to the arrival of one K Goldsmith.”

Goldsmith's own account of his composition reinforces the suggestion that this book, too, might be void of meaning in a different manner but to a similar extent as *Day*. “I wrote much of this book in the New York City collection of the Jefferson Market Library, a place that I found about through your blog. I would spend the entire day, say, researching the blocks around the Library—Patchin Place, Eighth Street, Christopher Street, etc.— in the twentieth century. But when I would leave the library, I would enter a city that bore little resemblance to where I was reading about. I really might as well have been researching the book in, say, Switzerland, instead of in Greenwich Village” (Moss). This seems to invalidate any relevant meaning you might derive from reading his book by

drawing a distinct line between his concept and the real world, between his sources and his experience, experience which drove the process of writing the book to begin with.

As for its readability, Goldsmith's remarks in his interview and in the book itself suggest that it is as unreadable as *Day* but in a less conspicuous manner. He tells Moss that it is "as unreadable as the city itself," a statement that is not particularly self-evident. The prefatory metatext at the beginning of *Capital* itself clarifies this idea: "*Capital* is a book designed to fascinate and to fail— for can a megalopolis truly be written? Can a history, no matter how extensive, ever be comprehensive? Each reading of this book, and of New York, is a unique and impossible passage." If *Day* was simply unreadable, *Capital* can be read but was written with or as a self-destruct mechanism that sabotages any reading to live up to its concept of fully encompassing history with the written word. In 2016, this idea is anything but novel; you can turn back nearly a century to the inception of Pound's *Cantos*, among other modernist works, to see such a failure of the encyclopedic text.

Capital reiterates an old idea that is known to have already failed in a text that is built to fail. Its readability, in terms of deriving any relevant meaning, is *alleged*; more comfortable perhaps but still akin to *Day*. Finally and certainly not least we have the book itself, and not simply its 1000+ pages. It is a shimmering solid gold volume with an equally dazzling cardboard sleeve, more reminiscent of Fort Knox than of New York City. It's as though the material presentation of the book is more noticeable in correlation with the alleged readability of the book, readability which tends to obscure the materiality of literature, of the printed words which are the foundation for any interpreted or abstracted meanings and connections.

Just as the concept of *Day* leads us back to the far more substantial materiality of its execution, the alleged readability of *Capital* leads us back to its concept— a concept which has already failed prior to the inception of the book— which in turn leads us to consider once again the validity or necessity of its material execution. Importantly, it is harder to peg *Capital* for a conceptual book that so thoroughly neglects the final executed product in a manner that *Day* does. Its apparent readability creates an important bridge between conceptual (unreadable, meaningless) literature and non-conceptual (readable, interpretable, meaningful) literature and the hidden potential for waste, and hidden actual material waste, therein.

Finally, it's worth noting that in spite of the unignorably massive scale of both his concept and execution, Goldsmith doesn't seem to lean one way or the other in terms of the apocalypse. This silence or neutrality seems potentially dangerous given the amount of mindless waste he intentionally cranks out.

Within or outside of his texts, he doesn't express the urgency we saw in his non-conceptual contemporaries; the passion he has he aims at the project itself. There is once again a disconnection.

What Goldsmith's conceptual work does that previous modernist or later works don't do is *perform* a negligence of materiality through his process rather than describe, poeticize, romanticize, or moralize it in finished, produced verse. Since materiality itself is so easily ignored, perhaps his conceptualizing and ultimately meaningless play with different modes of materiality works to make visible the materiality of a text (digital, print) that perpetually withdraws, recedes from our attention for the metaphor, the concept. Goldsmith is certainly also a poet whose work on and with waste and excess

functions as a metaphor for the queer and the Other; his texts also explore the relationship between different media and the artist's virtually inescapable position as a producer of commodities. In terms of materiality and waste, he gives us a concept which, when treated separately from any possible interpretations of its finished product, leave us with only the materiality of that finished product to consider— a concept of materiality. Tending to this concept as such becomes an effort to prevent the physical, printed materiality of the texts from slipping back into hiddenness, printed texts whose inexplicable bulk is not an accidental byproduct of his conceptual work but in fact the final point. Goldsmith demonstrates how strikingly affective nonexpository, even unreadable, poetry can be at drawing attention to such a central, global problem. Unfortunately, in the process of giving garbage a lot of attention, he creates a lot of garbage.

CONCLUSION: TRANSPARENCY, LOCALITY, OBSOLESCENCE

Accountability and ethical engagement have become defining concerns for poets of waste in the twenty-first century. Within this, establishing a poetics that brings and keeps this waste in the visible foreground remains a central challenge. Kenneth Goldsmith's conceptual projects demonstrate the unfriendly extreme—unfriendly to the reader and to the earth—poetry can go to effectively represent the scale of our contemporary garbage narrative. Highlighting the material waste of the world by exaggerating the materiality of the poetry comes at an unpleasant cost. With this tricky issue of materiality in mind, I turn to contemporary spaces, facilities, and monuments that have been constructed to respond to the concerns of the Anthropocene.

Facing many of the same challenges as poets, artists and designers of the twenty-first century continue to renegotiate their relationship with waste and nature. Mira Engler's *Designing America's Waste Landscapes* (2004) describes contemporary efforts to redesign landscapes ravaged by waste into landscapes developed with and supported by waste, albeit with some tension. Her book studies the ways in which art and design intervene with waste disposal to create more deliberate and transparent sites. The two most popular modern methods of waste disposal have been *camouflage* and *utilitarian* methods (37). Camouflage disguised the disposal sites in which for instance a park might rest on a hidden dump; the utilitarian method reused the refuse to contribute to public recreation, agriculture, or private land development. In both “the waste, an integral part of the sites, did not inform the design” and the solutions to waste disposal kept the

problem invisible (37). Like so much of the garbage poetry of the twentieth century, these methods perpetuate the conceptualization of nature and civilization as two separate spheres interlocked in an ongoing struggle for balance rather than as part of a singular ecology. These approaches have since developed into a more sophisticated means of visibly integrating garbage into rehabilitated, functional sites “rebuilt according to the specifics of the waste place and the technology used to shape them, rather than turned back into a nature reserve or a city park...industrial ruins were revived according to their own daring prescriptions and meanings, lending themselves to adventure and play” (Engler 39). These projects seek to restore their sites and mitigate further damage, and moreover they emphasize a visible, transparent relationship with waste in order to educate their patrons and celebrate their achievement without hiding the source but instead deliberately sharing it (39).

An extreme example of this challenge comes with radioactive waste disposal, as Engler discusses in “Post-nuclear Monuments, Museums, and Parks” (2005). Nuclear memorial museums have often succumbed to a propaganda-like depiction of our history with atomic energy rather than offered a thorough and direct critique of the tangible and cultural dangers. Underground deep storage facilities, contentious already as wrecklessly insufficient solutions, struggled to find the best way to clearly mark the sites so they would not be lost during their 10,000-year residence but also marked in such a way that would not attract future populations to tamper with them. In an ongoing effort to achieve this critical transparency, a 2001 Plutonium Memorial contest challenged artists and designers to negotiate the hidden, long-term volatility with the need to present visible education (50). While the particular problems of nuclear waste management may not

translate neatly into poetic terms, the rhetoric of the submissions for the contest mirror the concerns of Anthropocene poetry closely. These submissions considered the need to create a visible, distinct monument; the possibility of the space doubling as public space or educational tourist attraction; and the ethical demand for accountability and change (51).

The winner of the contest was a project called *24110* (the number of years it takes nuclear fuel to reach its half-life) offered a memorial and waste disposal site in one. According to the designers' official web page, in order to "express time" the monument should incorporate a clock; in order to "express volatility" it should offer a visible contrast of strength and fragility; to "expose the source" it educates on individuals and chapters of history responsible; and to "admit our fatuity... The memorial should express our mistake in a bold, simple, and not-so-subtle way" ("Mike and Maaike"). The design plans delineate a flat circular structure with an edge lifted as though someone is beginning to peel it open like a lid, described by the designers to be as though a hand were lifting up the corner of a rug and sweeping this grave problem under it. This memorial was to be placed directly in Washington D.C., and not surprisingly it was never constructed; but the interlocking values it espouses speak directly to the Anthropocene.

The ideation and execution of these projects (if they are in fact executed) are sympathetic to each other, while conceptual poetry by definition subordinates its end product in order to highlight the values of its process. The difficulty poetry has in achieving the same kind of presence is largely due to the inherently material or physical nature of interacting with a playground or a nature reserve or a memorial; you attend them in order to deliberately engage with their materiality, while the ink and paper of

poetry tend to be the streamlined and hidden backdrop of the reading experience. While the materiality of the poem can easily butt heads with its concept, as conceptual poetry has shown, these waste disposal projects can still provide some insight into the more successful poetics of waste.

One attribute poetry shares with these projects is the need to establish transparency—a transparent rhetoric that confronts us with visible waste and its visible effects, and rendering transparent the institutions in place which block our metaphorical view of garbage. As with many waste monuments and memorials, the initial opacity for poets to overcome lay with narratives their own poems had been telling. Over the course of a century, the emotionally veiled, ironic, and arguably disingenuous relationship with garbage we see in Wallace Stevens gives way to texts of emotional honesty which explore an often antagonizing confrontation with the world's waste, as with Tommy Pico. The poets of the *Big Energy* collection mimic conceptual writing's emphasis on process without sacrificing the end product by supplying prose meta-text to give context and speak of the writing process. Overall, poets shifted the dynamic from looking into garbage as a particular kind of mirror into oneself to asking how all the mirrors got there to begin with.

Some poetry of the Anthropocene also expresses an emphatic utilization of the local in exploring sites of waste or ravaged nature. While waste disposal sites face the challenge of transparently incorporating waste but still creating an interactive public space, the challenge for poetry as noted above lies in its functionally invisible materiality. Poetry doesn't occupy or take up space in the same way as a nuclear memorial site, but it remains capable of situating itself in local circumstances or phenomena—as terribly

obvious as this may sound, it bears repeating when the very place you inhabit is at stake. Everywhere, the local particulars are under threat of being subsumed, but it is through these local particulars that we are in large part tethered to the planetary whole. Linda Russo, who pinpointed where she wanted us to stand in “Going to Survey Walmart Construction,” describes her poetics as synonymous with the ecologist concept of “reinhabitation” which refers to “the process of becoming an inhabit of one’s bioregion through knowledge of natural boundaries... plants and animals,” and so on (Staples and King 89). This isn’t a low-tech attempt at stepping impossibly backwards into a simpler or more wholesome relation with the earth; it’s about making poetry visible, illuminating its potential for “developing inhabitant knowledge” (190). If the readership is able to “imagine the importance of the integrity of the natural economy that exists in a place, then there is hope for the larger goal of environmental justice that stands for the rights of all beings to their lifeways on planet earth” (190). At the core of poetry is its potential to provoke its readers to become truly aware of and invested in their particular place. Poetry, in turn, works as a “positive resurgence” which describes how plants and animals respond to a sudden disruption and it is crucial for the survival of an ecosystem. When blocked, “destructive feral biologies erupt” in place of the once-thriving ecosystem; if however resurgence is allowed then poetry emerges from the ground up, from within a particular ecosystem giving attention to its locale but impacting the whole.

With transparency and locality in mind I want to return finally to what Margaret Ronda called poetry’s “degree of obsolescence,” in which poetry finds itself thriving in a number of forms and locales but has no consistent, sustained influence on political and social life—it has no podium and no microphone (17). As a “leftover,” Ronda describes

poetry as in a unique position to engage with waste as similarly ubiquitous yet peripheral; her account however focuses on the way garbage resonates with poetry rather than how garbage poetry might resonate with its readership (17). Poetry is by no means alone in the margins; a task for future waste poets of the twenty-first century may lie in transparently reinhabiting poetry's particular materiality and obsolescence.

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