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Towards an Eco-poetics of Food: Plants, Agricultural Politics, and Colonized Landscapes in Lorine Niedecker's Condensery

Michelle Niemann

When the late modernist, working class poet Lorine Niedecker called her poetic occupation “this condensery,” she figured poetry-writing as agro-industrial labor: condenseries make condensed milk, and Niedecker was surrounded by them in her native Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.¹ Though this metaphor appears in her 1962 poem “Poet’s work,” it aptly characterizes the poetics of Niedecker’s “New Goose” period, from about 1936 to 1945.² This poetic condensery brings together Niedecker’s concerns in an especially telling way. The term invokes not only Ezra Pound’s emphasis on compression and Louis Zukofsky’s dictum that “condensation is more than half of composition,” but also food politics and modern agriculture as a key part of Niedecker’s local context.³ Niedecker’s “condensery” embodies in one word her vexed relationship—as a woman, a member of the rural working class, and a poet—with metropolitan modernism on one hand and with those whom she called the “folk” on the other. Sampling the voices of rural speakers in her radically condensed New Goose poems, Niedecker constructs deceptively simple Mother Goose puns that play on the specific capacities of plants to critique the twin ironies of modern food production: industrial-scale farming and rural hunger.

In these poems, Niedecker pushes back against both the urban condescension of her leftist readers in New York and the ideologies of regional political movements centered on food and agriculture. To the metropolitan coterie audience for modernist

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 Fig. 1. Barrels of powdered milk in a milk condensing plant, Antigo, Wisconsin, 1941, photo, by John Vachon. Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

poetry that constituted Niedecker's primary readership in the 1930s and 1940s, the New Goose poems insist on the political importance of farmers and the poetic potency of rural "folk" speech. In the context of Depression-era farmers' movements that not only dominated Wisconsin politics, but also shaped national politics and New Deal policies, Niedecker's poems critique the masculinism, racism, and devotion to private property that compromised farmers' insistence that they be paid at least the cost of production for the food they provided to the nation.

I argue that Niedecker, in the condensery of her New Goose poems, develops a politically nuanced ecopoetics of food that pays critical attention to the intertwined natural and cultural specificities—or what Donna Haraway calls the "emergent nature-cultures"—of modern food production.⁴ My argument builds on a broad scholarly turn associated with the environmental humanities, which have shown not only how reality fails to obey the abstract divide between "nature" and "culture," but also how this conceptual binary distorts our understanding of the world.⁵ I rely as well on food studies approaches that bridge the usual split between production and consumption in humanistic scholarship on food, and on recent work in critical plant studies, which foregrounds plants' materiality and agency.⁶ With the term "ecopoetics of food," I emphasize how material agencies shape both literary *poiesis* and the practical arts of farming, processing, preserving, preparing, and cooking food.⁷

Niedecker's New Goose poems enact an analysis that is materialist in both the classic Marxist and new materialist senses, with all the tensions that conjunction implies: these

poems pun on the material capacities of specific plants, from asparagus to quack-grass, in order to critique agriculture under capitalism. In her poetic “condensery,” Niedecker makes the seeming sureties of folk speech reveal material paradoxes—that is, paradoxes that are both economic and environmental. Niedecker’s linguistic and conceptual puns point up the lived oxymorons of a capitalist economy, where abundance creates poverty and the government pays farmers not to grow food. These New Goose poems often turn on one or several concealed puns and thus undo their own apparent closure, leaving the reader with more questions than answers.⁸ Form, here, is incommensurate with content—there is something delightfully preposterous about using Mother Goose to explore the ironies of capitalism—but this apparent mismatch gives the poems their nuanced power. Niedecker both celebrates the pluck and resistance of rural speakers and shows that folk wisdom is not insulated from an economic system that makes nonsense of common sense.

By punning on the specific capacities of plants, Niedecker not only shows how plants’ particular material agencies co-produced the cultural and agricultural world of 1930s and 1940s Wisconsin, but also enacts in language the difficult, biopolitically vexed collaboration with nonhuman agencies that her poems contemplate.⁹ In short, I argue that here puns *matter*. Puns play with and on language’s auditory, visual, and tactile materiality, but even more importantly, the poet, in crafting puns, collaborates with the particularities of a language—its capacities and accidents, its homophones and homonyms, its syntactic structures. In making with the material givens of a language, the poet is forced to cooperate with agencies over which she can never have full control and of which her knowledge is always incomplete. Niedecker’s puns sharpen understanding of the material paradoxes of economy and environment as they model the making of forms in tricky, necessary, conditioned collaboration with nonhuman agencies and processes. The “poet’s work,” that “condensery,” demonstrates how to collaborate with other material agencies because it involves such collaboration.

This argument builds on Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s essential reading of Niedecker’s poetics as a “reflective fusion” of surrealism, Objectivism, and projectivism that results in a “materialist sublime . . . an ecological position of subjectivity schooled by the objective world.”¹⁰ In “Thoughts on Things,” Jonathan Skinner uses the following short, untitled poem by Niedecker to develop a reading of her ecopoetics that cites Charles Olson’s objectism and land artist Robert Smithson’s “entropology” as well:

Mergansers
fans
on their heads

Thoughts on things
fold unfold
above the river beds (Niedecker, *Collected Works*, 246)

Skinner’s reading shows how Niedecker plays on the materiality of thoughts, things, and the poem itself; he defines the resultant ecopoetics as “singing *with* the other-

138 than-human.”¹¹ In another essay that delineates Niedecker’s practice of ecopoetry in more detail, Skinner focuses on her “particular attention” to the natural world and her non-teleological Darwinism.¹² Niedecker was indeed well read in natural history and evolutionary theory as well as a keen observer of birds, animals, flowers, and rocks; as Skinner argues, her poetry does attend to “the untended *as* the untended” (“Thoughts on Things,” 46–47). But her work also focuses on the fraught interactions and modes of attention involved in *tending*. Thus Niedecker’s New Goose poems about farming, gardening, and processing food are essential to a complete picture of her ecopoetics.

Niedecker’s work implies that ecology concerns not only the wild and untended, but also the ways in which political and socioeconomic systems are always intertwined with the nonhuman world—perhaps most viscerally through the production of food. Allison Carruth has shown how wartime food politics and rationing shaped the late modernist literature of food in general and Niedecker’s work in particular.¹³ While Carruth’s analysis focuses on wartime rationing in a few of Niedecker’s New Goose poems and especially in the 1950 poem “In the great snowfall before the bomb,” I turn to the ways in which the New Goose poems address Depression-era food politics and New Deal agricultural policies.¹⁴

Michael Davidson argues that Niedecker is a “critical regionalist”—that is, that her rural anti-capitalism and her insistence on living and writing in Fort Atkinson constitute a critique of metropolitan culture that expands the geography of late modernist political poetry.¹⁵ But while Davidson uses the term “critical regionalism” to re-appropriate the “regionalist” label that has been used to minoritize Niedecker’s work, the agricultural politics that Niedecker addresses are arguably more national than the urban proletarian politics evident in the work of her fellow Objectivists, including her longtime correspondent Louis Zukofsky. Food is never far from politics, especially in a state that produced “more fluid milk, more condensed and evaporated milk, and more cheese” than any other state by the mid-1930s.¹⁶ Once we attend, not just to the *polis* where both politics-as-usual and radical activism take place, but to the food and agricultural production systems that sustain that *polis*, Niedecker’s insistence on the centrality of the Midwest seems not only an incisive critical gesture, but also a warning.

Niedecker wrote her New Goose poems in the 1930s and early 1940s, during a farm depression that started in 1920, not 1929, and before what environmental scientists now call the Great Acceleration—the boom in population, production, consumption, and concomitant anthropogenic changes to the global environment after 1945.¹⁷ Following World War II, agriculture in the United States would change radically as widespread use of fertilizer and pesticides and the introduction of hybrid varieties increased production and the number of farms and farmers dropped precipitously.¹⁸ But in 1933, farmers still made up thirty percent of the US labor force.¹⁹ In the Midwest, farming was generally a small-scale, family enterprise and diversified or “mixed” farming—in which farmers not only produced commodities like wheat, corn, milk, or meat for the market, but also grew vegetables, kept chickens and dairy cows, and raised livestock for home consumption—was common.²⁰ However, agriculture in the Midwest had been capitalist in its economic organization and industrial in scale since US colonization: in



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Fig. 2. Corn and dairy farm, Dodge County, Wisconsin, 1941, photo, by John Vachon. Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Wisconsin, Euro-American settlement in the 1840s and 1850s was accompanied by a wheat bonanza that peaked in the 1860s and 1870s as pioneers busted the sod.

In fact, the *Wisconsin* guide—a book produced by the WPA’s Federal Writers’ Project, for which Niedecker worked from 1938 to 1942—tells the story of a late-nineteenth-century agricultural reform movement, based in Fort Atkinson, that encouraged farmers to switch to dairy because of the environmental and agricultural problems that wheat had caused.²¹ This “agricultural revolution” was a move from pioneer monocropping that exploited the rich soil of Wisconsin’s prairies and oak savannas to a more diversified and sustainable agricultural model based on pasturing cattle and making milk products (*Wisconsin: A Guide*, 93).²² Niedecker lived in a state with still lively ideals of republican citizenship and with a long history of varied farmers’ movements, from the Grangers and Robert LaFollette’s progressivism to cooperative marketing among dairy farmers.²³ At the University of Wisconsin in Madison, just up the road from Fort Atkinson, the intellectual underpinnings of New Deal agricultural policies were taking shape.²⁴ In nearby Iowa, Milo Reno’s Farmers’ Holiday Movement began calling farm “strikes” in 1932, in which farmers picketed and blocked roads to withhold their commodities from the market until prices rose.²⁵ Niedecker’s New Goose poems responded to such contentious food politics not only with empathy for rural people and an ear for “folk” speech, but also with a rural working class knowledge of the natural and cultural materialities that condition food production and a leftist willingness to confront the racism, sexism, and capitalist ideologies that hampered farmers’ movements.

In what follows, I address three key aspects of Niedecker’s ecopoetics of food, first analyzing how Niedecker puns on the capacities of specific plants in order to critique

140 modern systems of food production and distribution and New Deal agricultural policies. Next, I show how Niedecker traces the failure of the “folk” to develop a coherent rural anti-capitalism to the history of colonization, revealing how the dispossession of indigenous people was carried out, in part, through radical changes to the foodscape. Finally, I argue that Niedecker’s multilayered punning on material paradoxes offers a way to reimagine the relationship between poetry and the practical arts of growing and preparing food.

Agricultural Politics, Folk Voices, and the Capacities of Plants

From May 13 to 18 of 1933, dairy farmers across much of Wisconsin, organized as the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool, went on strike. Striking farmers blocked roads, stopped trucks that were not marked with the white cross that designated “public welfare” milk, and dumped the milk of non-striking farmers out on the ground. Their demand was that they be paid at least the cost of production for their product.²⁶ Though such farmers’ movements were an important part of Depression-era politics, ideologies about private property as well as social and cultural rifts kept farmers from making common cause with the urban, proletarian left. In her analysis of the theatricality of food policy protests by both farmers and consumers during the New Deal, Ann Folino White shows how the agrarian rhetoric surrounding the Wisconsin milk strike emphasized farmers’ whiteness, masculinity, and status as property-owners. Members of the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool defined themselves as “owner-tillers,” thereby distinguishing themselves on the one hand from landless farm laborers, who were prohibited from joining the cooperative, and on the other hand from landlords and absentee owners, who were part of the corporate “octopus” they were fighting (*Plowed Under*, 70).

Niedecker was well aware of the racism, devotion to private property, and scorn for the urban “masses” that shaped such movements, and she critiques just these aspects of them in her 1937 short story “Uncle.” As Jenny Penberthy notes, the story’s setting and characters are mostly autobiographical; its storyline, however, reflects on agricultural politics in Wisconsin from the late nineteenth century to the Depression (*Collected Works*, 456). Like Niedecker, the main character, Uncle Babe, comes from a rural family that is propertied but poor and has to drop out of college early, without a degree. He strives to “mak[e] a name for himself”—his name, humorously, is John Julius Benjamin Beefelbein—in part by organizing dairy farmers into a cooperative and running for political office (305).

“Uncle,” which was published in *New Directions*, challenges a metropolitan audience to recognize the importance of agricultural politics, but, like Niedecker’s New Goose poems, also critiques the “folk”—“from whom all poetry flows / and dreadfully much else,” as she writes in a later poem—for failing to develop a coherent rural anti-capitalism.²⁷ The dairy farmers John struggles to organize are reluctant to form a cooperative, in part because similar efforts had failed in the past:



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 Fig. 3. Empty milk cans at the cooperative creamery, Westby, Vernon County, Wisconsin, 1942, photo, by Arthur Rothstein. Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

He pointed out this would be bigger, more powerful, like the labor unions only better because “we” could handle “our own” products. They didn’t like the mention of labor unions but John pointed out that whereas labor unions were perhaps socialistic, the farmers’ union would be the good American thing. (*Collected Works*, 318)

By emphasizing farmers’ status as property owners and primary producers, John is able to link the cooperative with independent masculinity and patriotism, not with urban, socialist labor unions. The farmers join the cooperative and achieve some gains, but then World War I arrives:

He won an inch for the farmers, now the boom coming on—the only boom the farmers ever had was during the war—they relaxed. Things were going well even without the co-op. Their fight collectively slackened, as good as ended. Each farmer again competed with each. Wasn’t it a free capitalist country? (325)

The assumption that “free competition” should rule in every sphere mars John’s life as well as the farmers’ movement. Niedecker’s story explores the irony that John “entered public service” in pursuit of both social justice and personal prestige (305).

“Uncle” was probably written around the time that Niedecker began composing her New Goose poems, the first of which appeared in 1936. Food, hunger, and agricultural politics preoccupied Niedecker in these early poems, but here food functions more

142 figuratively than materially. The following untitled poem, for example, metaphorically links food with cultural nourishment:

Nothing nourishing,
 common dealtout food;
 no better reading
 than keeps us destitute. (112)²⁸

This poem hints at the irony of “dealtout food” in a county and a state with an agricultural economy, and it suggests that reading that “keeps us destitute” is also “dealtout” rather than homegrown, whether it is propaganda or simply official metropolitan culture. But the poem also puns on “reading,” which could mean interpretation as well as reading material: interpretations of the social and political situation that do not create change keep the speaker’s community “destitute.”²⁹ “Food” and “reading” here are colorless and unspecified precisely because they are “dealtout,” but while the poem indicates Niedecker’s left-wing politics and implies her critical regionalism, its speaker could be either urban or rural.

In a poem from 1936, Niedecker sets out the broad, national problem of food and politics that later New Goose poems deal with in more locally specific ways:

A country’s economics sick
 affects its people’s speech.

No bread and cheese and strawberries
 I have no pay, they say.

Till in revolution rises
 the strength to change

the undigestible phrase. (*Collected Works*, 86)³⁰

As G. Matthew Jenkins notes, this poem shows how “economics, the material of food, politics, and language are all integral to the position of the subject for Niedecker.”³¹ Here, a “sick” economy changes not only what people eat—“no pay” means “No bread and cheese and strawberries”—but also how they speak. Those who say they “have no pay” are probably urban rather than rural: the rural poor, after all, could grow “strawberries,” bake “bread,” and even make their own “cheese,” like Aunt Riecky in “Uncle,” who “always . . . made her own butter and sausages and bread and cheese” and canned “vegetables from the garden” (*Collected Works*, 309). But for urban poor or working-class people, these basic foods can only be bought at the store.

Niedecker plays on the grandeur and dissonance of revolutionary hopes through the syntactically ambiguous role of the closing “undigestible phrase.” If we read it in apposition to the previous line, as a description of “the strength to change,” the “undigestible phrase” becomes the subject of the verb “rises”—that is, a rising revolutionary

cry that cannot be stifled. If we instead read it as the direct object of “change,” the “undigestible phrase” is what needs to be changed—i.e., capitalism, a sick “economics” that catches in the throat and must be spat out. Either reading, taken on its own, seems uncomfortably confident about the inevitability of revolution, and perhaps Niedecker felt so as well, since she did not publish this poem in her lifetime. But if we stick with the poem’s ambivalence, the “undigestible phrase” points back to the spoken admission that “I have no pay” and indicates that unemployment, in a capitalist, industrial economy, means no access to such basic foods as “bread and cheese and strawberries.” Being out of work is, in a certain sense, no more than a “phrase” about one’s current valuation in the social semiotics of money, but it has “undigestible” material consequences.

Only after Niedecker began her research for the WPA’s Federal Writer’s Project in 1938 did her New Goose poems start speaking in “folk” voices. As her poems became more culturally particular, Niedecker also began to attend to the material particularities of food. Here, critical plant studies can help us interpret Niedecker’s puns, which show how food practices become bound up with capitalist systems that make it difficult to think, or farm, otherwise. The following poem, published in the 1946 *New Goose* volume but excluded from later collections published in Niedecker’s lifetime, focuses on capitalism’s manufactured desires in a regional context. Niedecker contrasts the garden’s productivity with the accumulation of wealth required to purchase consumer goods that signal femininity:

I doubt I’ll get silk stockings out
of my asparagus
that grows too fast to stop it,
or any pair of Capital’s
miracles of profit. (*Collected Works*, 103)

It is a funny poem: the speaker complains, through a double pun on “stockings,” that her asparagus won’t give her wealth or store-bought clothes. The next poem in *New Goose* includes the word “stock” in its first line, thereby underscoring the pun on the stock market; the “miracles of profit” are both stocks and the women’s stockings that sell so well in a conformist culture.

But the word “stockings” also puns on “stalks” of asparagus, hinting at the poem’s underlying conceptual pun: capitalist profits grow as fast as stalks of asparagus. Despite the “stop it” / “profit” rhyme that gives the poem a jaunty ring of closure, the compressed linguistic and conceptual puns at work here open out onto a multifaceted critique of economics and culture. At first the poem seems to say simply that agricultural productivity can never equal wealth in a capitalist economy: the asparagus’s runaway growth is a form of abundance, even a “miraculous” one, though it will not buy luxuries. However, the comparison of fast-rising stocks to fast-growing stalks of asparagus also implies that “Capital’s / miracles of profit” are unsustainable and contain their own end. Asparagus is an early-season crop in the Midwest; it is a perennial whose underground crown of roots sends up stalks that can be harvested early in the spring, but as the weather warms, the stalks start growing faster and faster, become long and spindly, and must



Fig. 4. Harvesting wheat on the Saugstad farm, Vernon County, Wisconsin, 1942, photo, by Arthur Rothstein. Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

be left to go to seed, which renders them inedible. Asparagus that “grows too fast to stop it” is not producing food, but coming to the end of its season.³² In other words, this light poem critiques capitalism’s boom-and-bust cycles—or perhaps even forecasts the end of capitalism—through a comparison that pays “particular attention” to the specific capacities of asparagus.

While that poem critiques capitalism more than it does its female speaker, Niedecker’s New Goose poems in folk voices are often radically compressed dramatic monologues that do, I contend, often criticize their rural speakers. Ventriloquizing folk speakers seems like a fraught enterprise: does Niedecker risk patronizing those whose voices she samples? While this poetic technique always carries that risk, Niedecker’s own vexed position in relation to the “folk” mitigates it. Like the family in “Uncle,” her maternal grandparents and parents struggled to make a living from the “ten-guest hotel” they owned and ran on Black Hawk Island, a low, flood-prone peninsula outside Fort Atkinson. Niedecker herself scraped by, working a varied series of jobs between periods of unemployment, and for years lived in a small cabin without indoor plumbing (Peters, *Lorine Niedecker*, 9). Niedecker published her poetry and corresponded with poets throughout her life, but she hid her identity as a poet from almost everyone she knew locally.³³ Whether because of gender, class, or politics, Niedecker kept her commitments to place and to poetry by keeping them separate. She critiques rural culture as one who is fully in it but not entirely of it.

In a key poem that exemplifies Niedecker's status as simultaneously an insider and an outsider, the speaker complains about New Deal agricultural policies while Niedecker highlights the irony of plenty causing poverty.

The government men said Don't plant wheat,
we've got too much, just keep out weeds.

Our crop comes up thru change of season
to be stored for what good reason

way off and here we need it—Eat
who can, who can't—Don't grow wheat

or corn but quack-grass-bread!
Such things they plant around my head. (*Collected Works*, 121)

At first, the speaker seems to offer a fairly straightforward critique of New Deal agricultural policies: people are hungry and yet the government is telling us to plant less.³⁴ Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) did, in fact, attempt to raise commodity prices by restricting supply; beginning in 1933, the Triple-A, as it was called, paid farmers to plant fewer acres through a system of land set-asides administered by county extension agents. Though large majorities of farmers signed up to set aside acres and receive payments, the AAA's image was almost immediately tarnished by photos and news stories of farmers plowing under a mature cotton crop in the South and of six million piglets being slaughtered before maturity. Wheat farmers did not have to destroy crops, but the idea of producing less food at a time when people were hungry was disturbing to many.³⁵

The speaker's complaint that "our crop" is "stored . . . way off" alludes to another New Deal program set up in the 1938 Farm Act, in which the federal Commodity Credit Corporation loaned farmers a set commodity price for their crop, storing it in what was called the "ever-normal granary" (Gardner, *American Agriculture*, 225). While the poem echoes farmers' common frustrations with New Deal policies, Niedecker also critiques capitalist systems of agricultural production and distribution. After all, not just the New Deal's crop storage program, but modern commodity monocultures in general are premised on farmers shipping what they grow off to market, not eating it "here" at home. As the main character muses in "Uncle," "most cattle and hogs were shipped way to Chicago and then the meat was shipped way back again" (*Collected Works*, 316). Taken to its extreme, cash crop farming means that farmers buy the food they eat at the store like everyone else—or don't buy it when they cannot afford it. The speaker of the poem is right about the message this system sends: "Eat / who can, who can't—Don't grow wheat // or corn but quack-grass-bread!"

Knowing the specific capacities of "quack-grass" is essential for understanding the complex puns at work in this poem.³⁶ Quack-grass, or couch-grass, is *Elymus repens*, a weed that is native to Europe and a common invasive in North America; it plagues

146 farmers because its rhizomes, or roots that grow laterally underground and send up new shoots, wrap around crops and form thick mats if left unchecked. It is very difficult to eradicate because tilling it tends to chop up the rhizomes and thus, since each bit of rhizome can grow a new plant, spread the quack-grass. The speaker implies that fields left to fallow under the AAA would be taken over by quack-grass, which is hard to “keep out.” Though quack-grass is most infamous as a weed, some mid-twentieth-century guidebooks to edible plants note that bread can be made from it, though this hardly seems to have been a common practice.³⁷

Thus “quack-grass-bread” is both an oxymoron that the speaker uses to denounce New Deal agricultural policy—the government is telling us to grow and eat weeds!—and Niedecker’s hint at a solution, which would not involve actually making bread from quack-grass, but at least implies that diversified farming for subsistence, or growing one’s own bread, would make more sense than growing cash crops whose prices have bottomed out due to the Depression and overproduction. But though that solution is implicit in the poem’s idiom, it remains unnamed because the speaker does not question monoculture (i.e., “wheat // or corn”). As the poem breaks the syntax of its phrases awkwardly across rhyming couplets, it enacts the violation of sense that exasperates the speaker. But the speaker does not manage to uproot the “things they plant around my head”—his mind is as caught as corn in quack-grass.

Another poem left unpublished in Niedecker’s lifetime deals perhaps even more pointedly with the way a rural speaker with conventional capitalist assumptions about abundance, scarcity, and price fails to put together the pieces and come up with a coherent response to the realities of food production under capitalism:

Their apples fall down
and rot on the ground—
they don’t spray their trees,
trees need care.
You can tell they’re no good
that live there.

Apples are high—
that shows they’re scarce,
still the stores always seem to have plenty.
Can’t get a price
the farmers say—
I guess it’s because there’r too many. (*Collected Works*, 120–21)

Though Jonathan Skinner interprets the first stanza of this poem as if Niedecker agreed with the speaker’s assessment, the second stanza, in fact, ironizes and undercuts the first one.³⁸ The speaker first dismisses people who do not use pesticides or harvest all of their apples and then puzzles over the fact that apples at the store are plentiful and expensive while the farmers “Can’t get a price” for them. (Like the dairy farmers in “Uncle,” these farmers apparently “couldn’t sell their produce for more than it cost them

to produce it" [*Collected Works*, 316].) The speaker, relying on the classic economic logic of supply and demand to make sense of this situation, runs into a contradiction: if apples are expensive, that must mean supply is low; if farmers can't get much for apples, that must mean supply is high. Perhaps middlemen are making more on the apples than farmers, or, though apples at the store seem expensive to the speaker, the farmers still are not making enough from them to break even. But these explanations do not occur to the speaker because, again like the dairy farmers in "Uncle," the speaker assumes that "price determines need" without seeing that the market price can be an indicator of social power rather than real value (318). In any case, the second stanza—in which the speaker's capitalist assumptions lead to a dead end—undercuts the speaker's judgment about the people in the first stanza. Maybe those people are not simply too lazy to tend their trees properly—"they're no good / that live there"—but rather are using their money and their apples more wisely than the speaker knows. Through its condensation, this poem shows how the folk wisdom that knows how to judge people by a glance at their orchard is intertwined with conventional capitalist economic logic. Folk musings cannot get outside the material paradoxes that shape thought as long as the "folk" take capitalism for granted.

In "Uncle," Niedecker shows how racism, as well as capitalist ideology, hampered progressive farmers' movements. The main character, John, romanticizes African Americans, but does not support social equality:

To escape there were his acres and his radio. He liked to turn on the negro spirituals, the melting deep . . . Christ, how they could sing . . . the blackbirds settling down . . . he could forget about government. If he were asked about negroes he said they should be treated well but implied they shouldn't be given the upper hand. (326)

African American culture functions for John as an escape from the pressures of his own political striving. The reference to "blackbirds" may point back to the poem, attributed "*(from hearsay)*," that serves as epigraph to the story:

There were three crows sat on a tree,
They were as black as crows could be;
One said to the other see
The farmer sowing his seed—
Isn't he wonderful kind to the poor
I'm sure. (305)

The story's narrator remembers this poem as a "nursery jingle" that John's father recited to her, and it should perhaps be considered part of Niedecker's New Goose project. The poem underscores the crows' blackness, reminding the reader that crows serve as a standard racist shorthand for African Americans. Actual crows are also a threat to farmers who are "sowing . . . seed"—when the farmer leaves, they will eat the seed. But here, the crows—hungry and canny, figuring the human and nonhuman beings from whom the farmer thinks he must protect his crop—comment sarcastically on the

148 farmer's alleged charity to "the poor." As epigraph, this poem sets up for the story's double irony: John pursues economic justice exclusively for white, property-owning, male farmers as a way to advance himself.

Another New Goose poem shows how Niedecker understood her role as a writer and her family's gendered power dynamics through the lens of national agricultural politics, even as she subtly dissents from the most prominent critiques of dominant agricultural methods. Niedecker questions Dust Bowl discourses of soil depletion, in part by pointing up how farming was gendered and racialized in the Midwest in the 1930s and 1940s.³⁹ The poem is about Niedecker's mother, Daisy, and the indented strophes are in Daisy's voice:

Well, spring overflows the land,
floods floor, pump, wash machine
of the woman moored to this low shore by deafness.

Good-bye to lilacs by the door
and all I planted for the eye.
If I could hear—too much talk in the world,
too much wind washing, washing
good black dirt away.

Her hair is high.
Big blind ears.

I've wasted my whole life in water.
My man's got nothing but leaky boats.
My daughter, writer, sits and floats. (*Collected Works*, 107)

The poem mourns the fertile land eroded by the Dust Bowl, the wind "washing / good black dirt away," but Niedecker complicates that lament by putting it in her mother's mouth. Niedecker links her mother with the approaches to land that resulted in the Dust Bowl: the mother is in favor of soil and against wind and flood; she wants to be anchored and to dig in to "good black dirt." But, as Edward Faulkner argued in his best-selling 1943 book, *Plowman's Folly*, too much "digging in"—deep plowing with the moldboard plow—in fact helped create the Dust Bowl.⁴⁰ Moreover, the mother is herself occupied with "washing" and resents the flood that sweeps over her "wash machine" as well as her lilacs. The poem thus sets her work parallel to the wind that "washes" the soil away, suggesting that they are kindred forces and undercutting the mother's lament. The lines "too much wind washing, washing / good black dirt away" might even evoke the racialized dimensions of Dust Bowl soil jeremiads and Midwestern agriculture: the white male farmer is threatened not only by environmental catastrophe, but also by social and cultural change.⁴¹

The poem also riffs on the gendered dimensions of Dust Bowl discourses. On one hand, the mother martyrs herself to the women's work of washing and homemaking, which makes the frequent floods on Black Hawk Island more troublesome to her than

to her husband. On the other hand, she implies that her husband's failure of masculinity, his failure to dig in, is to blame for her wasted life: "I've wasted my whole life in water. / My man's got nothing but leaky boats." The poem's gender dynamics align the poet ("My daughter, writer") with her father and against her mother. The mother, "moored to this low shore by deafness," resents the floods because she will not or cannot "float" on them, like her more happy-go-lucky husband and daughter. Along with the floods and the winds that "wash" dirt away, the mother seems to reject politics itself as "too much talk in the world," invoking the old figure of rhetoric as a river. The mother spurns the change, flux, and contestation that her husband and daughter experience as beauty. The poem's opening line, "Well, spring overflows the land," has a long-suffering, colloquial ring to it, but Niedecker's pun on "wellspring" also implies that flood, or change itself, is a sustaining source rather than a constant frustration, as the mother thinks it. The poem thus suggests that "floating," not digging in, offers the best way to navigate the cultural and ecological specificities of a place.

The Taste of Colonized Landscapes

Niedecker's poems turn to the history of colonization and settlement in Wisconsin, and white ideologies about indigenous people, to understand the failure of the "folk" to develop a coherent rural anti-capitalism. Ann Folino White shows how the rhetoric of both the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool and the state about the May 1933 dairy-men's strike doubly "erase[d] Indians" by ignoring their participation and by telling "a Jeffersonian narrative of farmers' cultivation of the nation" that omits how the US government's "removal of Indians" facilitated the distribution of land to white farmers (*Plowed Under*, 74). In "Uncle," Niedecker shows how John's romanticization of Indians is intertwined with his idealization of "isolated country living" and independent American masculinity (*Collected Works*, 313). When John is a broken old man, his political and personal fights lost, even this romantic view fails him: he thinks, "go back to the Indians, they were happy . . . until their lands were taken away" (329).

In her New Goose poems, Niedecker traces the dispossession and deportation of indigenous people, using native and non-native fruit species to show how disruption of landscapes and foodscapes went hand-in-hand with the social and political devastation that US colonization and settlement wrought on indigenous nations. Indigenous people had long managed the landscape, though settlers often failed to recognize their management as such, assuming that anthropogenic features—such as prairies and oak savannahs that Indians maintained using fire—were wild.⁴² Settlers abruptly introduced new species and new practices, including logging, plowing, monoculture farming, pasturing livestock, and fire suppression, that altered the landscape in dramatic ways. While conservationist discourse has made much of native versus invasive species, our food, whether locally grown or not, is most often from non-native species—like the apple tree, for example. (Of course, this is true globally: North America did not have apple trees before European colonization, but neither did Britain have potatoes nor Italy tomatoes.) Native and non-native fruit trees, in Niedecker's poems, not only

150 signify cultural differences and divergent concepts of ownership, but also foreground colonization's material changes to the environment.

One poem features the pawpaw, which produces the largest edible fruit of any tree native to the eastern United States and which Native Americans cultivated.⁴³

Black Hawk held: In reason
land cannot be sold,
only things to be carried away,
and I am old.

Young Lincoln's general moved,
pawpaw in bloom,
and to this day, Black Hawk,
reason has small room. (*Collected Works*, 99)

As Jonathan Skinner notes, the pawpaw would have been blooming in Illinois when the brigade of which a young Abraham Lincoln was a member pursued Black Hawk's band north into Wisconsin ("Particular Attention," 52).⁴⁴ Niedecker uses the pawpaw as a marker, not only of indigeneity and Native American attitudes toward land, but also of a landscape that looked, smelled, and tasted radically different before colonization.

"Reason" is key to this poem's multilayered linguistic and conceptual puns. It appears in the first and last lines, in the voice of both of the poem's speakers. In the first stanza, Black Hawk speaks near the end of his life, touching obliquely on why he led his band back from Iowa to their home in Illinois; in the second stanza, the poet-speaker looks back and addresses Black Hawk from her present ("to this day").⁴⁵ While "reason," in the English language, is associated with the Western tradition of rationalism, Black Hawk here uses the word to declare a kind of "reason" that is unrecognizable in that tradition. According to this "reason," only things that can be "carried away" can be bought and sold; it makes no sense to sell land. At the end of the poem, the speaker concedes that Western rationality is not reasonable: the expansion of Western political and economic systems have left little room for anything else, including true "reason."⁴⁶

Niedecker fleshes out this rethinking of "reason" via puns that ricochet through the poem, evoking its material context and echoing against her present in the early 1940s. While the declaration "I am old" is part of Black Hawk's plea that he be allowed to stay in his homeland, it is him and his people who are "carried away" by the US army. In effect, it is this "old" man who is "sold," as the rhyme suggests. After all, when "Lincoln's general moved"—that is, pursued Black Hawk's band—his brigade *removed* them from Illinois. "Indian removal," as it was called in the nineteenth century, involved not only the well-known Cherokee Trail of Tears in the South, but many smaller-scale deportations of indigenous nations from the Midwest in the 1830s and 1840s.⁴⁷

The rhyme that structures the second stanza is perhaps even more revealing: the pawpaw was in "bloom" when Black Hawk and his band were driven out of Illinois, but its "room," like Black Hawk's, was shrinking fast. It is not only reason that has "small room" as settler colonial societies expand, but also native peoples and forms of life.

Since the speaker points to the present in which the poem was written—i.e., between 1938 and 1945—with the phrase “to this day,” “room” could also evoke *lebensraum*, the Nazi ideology justifying expansionism and genocidal violence. The English word “room” most often names a room in a house or building; its German equivalent would be “*zimmer*.” But since this poem addresses dispossession and since Niedecker omits the definite article (just “small room,” not “a small room”), she also evokes the less common English sense of “room” as space, equivalent to the German “*raum*.” At the same time, the sense of a “small room” still lingers: Niedecker could be playing on John Donne’s famous line, “We’ll build in sonnets pretty roomes” to suggest that the small room of the poem itself preserves “reason.”⁴⁸ Reason can also be seen as occupying the “small room” of the head. Niedecker ties the pawpaw’s “bloom,” unfamiliar to members of twentieth-century US settler society, to Black Hawk’s alternative “reason” in order to point up the expansion of insane forms of rationalism that involve genocide, ecological harm, and treating land as private property.

Niedecker’s poem about Johnny Appleseed similarly explores the ways in which dispossession and settlement are bound up with deliberate environmental transformations that encode values justifying colonization.

When Johnny (Chapman) Appleseed
 came to a place he didn’t like
 he covered it with apple trees.
 He was the early American apple
 who changed the earth by dropping seeds.

He walked all over the mid-west states.
 His trees grew while he slept.
 Gave to the poor tho he himself
 lived on roots and had no bed.

Nor had he a wife. Nor creed
 that embraced grafting. Johnny
 reproduced by seed. (*Collected Works*, 118)

As a wanderer who was not attached to a particular homeland, Johnny Appleseed seems a converse of Black Hawk. At the same time, Johnny Appleseed “changed the earth”—or colonized it—by planting apple trees in places “he didn’t like.” He helped pioneers settle the Midwest by transforming the landscape itself, making it home to fruit trees that the settlers recognized.

The poem teases out the ethical attitude toward land that this implies through sexual and political puns. If Johnny is the “early American apple,” he also seems to be the American Adam, a self-made man. The poem slides toward a sexual interpretation of Johnny’s seeds as it moves by association from his lack of a bed to his lack of a wife. He also does not have a “creed / that embraced grafting”—while “embraced” continues the sexual double-entendre, “grafting” is a horticultural term for breeding

152 plants by splicing one variety onto another. But it is also, of course, a pun about ethics: Johnny does not believe in graft or deceit. The sexual pun of the last line—“Johnny / reproduced by seed”—clarifies the poem’s critique: Johnny, dropping his (apple) seeds all over the Midwest, refusing a wife, and objecting to the technique of grafting as deceitful, insists on reproducing his values, his English apple trees, with no biological or cultural admixture.

In “Pioneers,” Niedecker connects a local story of nineteenth-century settlement with the global history of twentieth-century industrial agriculture to ask “How to keep the earth.” At thirty-five lines, “Pioneers” stands out as one of the longest New Goose poems (*Collected Works*, 105–6). The poem reads like the foreshortened historical chronicle that it is: Richard Dart’s narrative about his family’s homestead in Wisconsin in the early 1840s was one of Niedecker’s sources.⁴⁹ The poem opens with a pun on the Dart family name: “Anson Dart pierced the forest, / fell upon wild strawberries.” Richard Dart was Anson’s son; Niedecker condenses his stories about food, farming, and the deportation of the Winnebago to chart the social and ecological dimensions of colonization:

Corn to be planted.
How to keep the strawberries?—
Indians’ sugar full of dirt.
How to keep the earth. (105)

In Dart’s account, “Indian sugar” is maple syrup bought from Native Americans who packed it in birch bark, so that it was “dirty” (“Settlement,” 262). Here, Niedecker’s juxtaposition instead makes wild strawberries an emblem of indigenous people’s cultivation practices.

By placing the reminder “Corn to be planted” alongside the question about how to “keep” the strawberries, Niedecker suggests some of the ways in which settler and indigenous agricultural practices conflict. “How to keep the strawberries?” condenses two questions Dart recounts in his narrative, one about how to preserve the strawberries they had found and picked, and the second about how to maintain the strawberry field itself. Dart writes that they “found a place as big as an eighty-acre lot, that had been burned over, all covered with ripe wild strawberries as big as any tame ones you ever saw, and so thick that you could not lay your hand down without crushing berries” (“Settlement,” 262). They picked as many as they could, but though “[w]e improved this strawberry patch for one or two years . . . at last the wild grass ran them out” (263). Evidently their “improvement” was not effective in cultivating the berries, and the clue to that might lie in the fact that the place was “burned over” when they first found it. Prairie fires set by Native Americans were responsible for keeping Wisconsin’s prairies and oak savannahs from growing up into forests, as they have since fire suppression became the norm (Mann, 1491, 251).⁵⁰ Niedecker implies that perhaps the Darts benefitted from Native American agriculture without recognizing it as such.

In asking “How to keep the earth,” Niedecker puns on “keep” again, this time adding the sense of “conserve,” but with the reference to buying land in the following strophe, “keep” also takes on, or becomes distorted by, the sense of “possession”:

Winnebagoes knew nothing
of government purchase of their land,
agency men got chiefs drunk
then let them stand. (*Collected Works*, 105)

“Stand” is at the center of another pun. Literally, federal agents ensure that the Ho-Chunk, formerly called the Winnebago, will fall over by getting them drunk and then letting them stand up. Figuratively, the “agency men” got the leaders of the Ho-Chunk drunk and then let their drunken decision to sell their people’s land “stand.” This scene reworks Dart’s account of watching the army round up the Ho-Chunk to deport them to a reservation in Iowa: “Some would lie down . . . and cry like children, and would beg the soldiers to bayonet them rather than drive them from their homes. Bad whiskey had been their curse” (“Settlement,” 268). Niedecker reinterprets Dart’s reference to alcohol and insists on showing that pioneering involved not only the settlers’ struggle to survive in a new place, but also the dispossession of indigenous people.

Niedecker’s reference to a second set of “pioneers,” Soviet Russians in the early years after the revolution, could pass unnoticed in a first reading of the poem, since this strophe, following further descriptions of Wisconsin pioneer hardships, applies almost as well to the US settlers’ situation as to the one in the new USSR:

Between fighting fourteen nations’ invading troops
and starting the first thousand-acre farms
we hungered,
an effort to rise or stand up straight. (*Collected Works*, 106)

In this passage and later ones, Niedecker draws on Maxim Gorky’s recollection of Russian intellectuals and artists suffering from hunger in 1920.⁵¹ The poem thus links the United States’s industrial agriculture with that of the USSR. Though its closing lines, in which the “red wheels” of a Communist tractor “gave the earth a new turn,” are in part celebratory, the poem also shows how the ambition to “rise” entails ecological losses and human suffering (*Collected Works*, 106).⁵²

In these poems, Niedecker shows how modes of thought and land management practices, culture and agriculture, are tied together, and how US settlers dispossessed indigenous people with the aid not only of colonialist ideologies, but also of their trees and crops. These ideologies include not only Western concepts of property ownership, but also basic assumptions about what agriculture is—i.e., a field of corn or wheat, not a prairie of mixed grasses, maintained by people through periodic burning, in which to hunt deer.⁵³ If the speaker in the poem “The government men said Don’t plant wheat” takes such assumptions so much for granted that they are invisible, he has little chance of effectively challenging the capitalist system of agricultural production and distribution.

154 **From Condensare to Condensery: an Eco-poetics of Food**

While I have shown how Niedecker's puns explore material paradoxes that are both economic and environmental, her concept of the poetic "condensery" puts high art and agro-industrial labor in conversation with each other. Niedecker's condensery pushes back against metropolitan Objectivism's "condensare" mandate from a critical regionalist perspective that not only insists that rural folks and agricultural economies need a revised leftist analysis, but also points to gendered and nonhuman agencies. At the same time, Niedecker's condensery speaks both to contemporary eco-poetics with its focus on embodied practices and to today's avowedly literary food movements and their treatment of everyday food practices—including gardening, cooking, and fermentation—as artisanal and even poetic.⁵⁴ In what follows, I elaborate those claims through a reading of "Poet's work," the 1962 poem in which Niedecker articulates her condensery poetics.

As she wrote in a letter to Clayton Eshelman when she was beginning to compose her longer poems, Niedecker came to think that she had "cut—cut—too many words" (quoted in Peters, *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet's Life*, 227). From about 1966 on, Niedecker wrote her most well-known poems, including "Lake Superior," "Wintergreen Ridge," and "Paeon to Place"; while these poems still condense radically on the level of the line and thought, they also string condensed pieces together in syncopated series to construct what are, for Niedecker at least, "long" poems, though none runs to more than a few pages.⁵⁵ Niedecker crafted her hard-won, sophisticated blend of disciplined condensation and emergent form through her engagement first with surrealism, then with Objectivism, and finally with projectivism. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis has shown, Niedecker developed her poetics through lifelong conversation with Zukofsky, but also played the Objectivist discipline she learned from him off against surrealism and, later, the practices of spontaneous composition advocated by New American, projectivist poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan. DuPlessis shows how Niedecker conceived of the Objectivist discipline of condensation in terms of restraining the long lines of her early surrealist work—and, more broadly, her tendencies toward excess. The practice of condensation thus takes on problematically gendered dimensions in the context of Niedecker's fraught relationship with Zukofsky.⁵⁶

In reflecting back on the poetics of her New Goose period in "Poet's work," Niedecker remakes "condensare" into "condensery," challenging the class valences, metropolitan location, and gendering of modernism and resituating the poet's work in the context of everyday labor that both sustains life and is imbricated in capitalist, industrial systems of agriculture and food processing. In *ABC of Reading*, Pound made much of an entry that Basil Bunting found in a German-Italian dictionary, "Dichten = condensare," or to compose poems is to condense.⁵⁷ Niedecker's "condensery" rewrites the cosmopolitan associations of Pound's Latinate "condensare": according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "condensery" is of US origin; the first citation is from an American dictionary in 1909.⁵⁸ Elizabeth Willis notes that Jefferson County, Wisconsin, where Niedecker lived, "was home to eighty-four creameries, many containing condenseries" ("Poetics

of Affinity,” 224). As the *Wisconsin* guide puts it, in the 1930s “dairying [was] a local industry of small producing units”—that is, both a big business and a decentralized one (73).

The specific contours of mid-twentieth-century condenseries in Wisconsin give “Poet’s work” its purchase, allowing Niedecker both to compare poetic labor to artisanal craft and to insist that it cannot be extricated from capitalist relations of production. Perhaps Niedecker pushes back against the gendered mandate of Objectivist condensation via the figure of the condensery—a factory that not only condenses milk, but also disciplines its workers. While Willis argues persuasively that the “condensery” “aptly references Niedecker’s practice of producing highly concentrated poems intended for long-term consumption, asserting her intellectual activity as both mechanical and manual labor within the vocabulary of her local economy,” Niedecker’s condensery also transvalues the modernist poetic work of condensation by comparing it to blue collar, agro-industrial labor (“Poetics of Affinity,” 224):

Poet’s work

Grandfather
advised me:
Learn a trade

I learned
to sit at desk
and condense

No layoff
from this
condensery (*Collected Works*, 194)

Niedecker’s speaker doesn’t name *what* she condenses at her desk; the raw material of the poet’s condensery—language—has been condensed out of this poem. The condensery figure, however, compares the poet’s raw materials to milk: that is, it implicitly compares language with food. Lurking behind the condensery worker, therefore, are cattle and the practices that make them produce milk year-round.⁵⁹ Playing this analogy through shows how vexed Niedecker perceived her own labor as a poet to be. “Poet’s work” implies that language, like milk, must be condensed in order to preserve its value; the poem depicts the poet condensing the language she herself has produced. So does the poem compare the female poet, who both produces language and condenses it, to a dairy cow or to a condensery worker? Or to both? Niedecker juxtaposes her gendered poetic labor with an agro-industry that disciplines both human and animal bodies, alluding to the power-vexed multispecies endeavor of agriculture as it was industrializing and scaling up in the 1930s through the 1960s.

But the poem also pivots on a key irony that sharply distinguishes the poet’s condensery from the factory that produces condensed milk: the irony contained in the line

156 “No layoff.” The speaker cannot be laid off from sitting at her desk and condensing lines of poetry—as she could from a job at the condensery down the street—but neither is she paid for it. She has “learned a trade,” but not in the sense her grandfather intended. He wanted her to acquire a skill and a discipline that would ensure her economic survival, but instead she has become “learnèd” and sits at a desk, writing poetry that she cannot eat and that does not buy her food. The lines “No layoff / from this / condensery” underscore the difference between the poet and a condensery worker not only by marking the poet’s labor as unpaid and unmonitored, but also by hinting at her independence. The speaker emphasizes the fact that she cannot be stopped from working, rather than the fact that she is not being paid. In a muted way, the speaker seems to be thumbing her nose: if her work is not recognized with compensation, it is also self-directed. The poem hints that pleasure or joy, if not liberation, lies in such independence, even if it comes at the impossible cost of a livelihood.

Niedecker refused the gendered divide between production and consumption that Carruth has identified in the literature of food. While the work I have analyzed here focuses primarily on farming and food processing, Niedecker also, though less often, wrote about cooking. In “Uncle,” Aunt Riecky is always cooking—“the stove would go out only between dinner and supper on hot summer days”—and she both martyrs herself to this constant women’s work and considers it a self-righteous point of pride (*Collected Works*, 309). Later in her life, Niedecker gave a handmade *Cooking Book* as a Christmas gift; it contains reflections and loose recipes, in longhand, that often joke about her own inability to cook and her husband Al’s facility in the kitchen.⁶⁰

Niedecker’s work thus suggests an eco-poetics of food that involves cooking, farming, and writing, disrupting divisions between high art and low craft, men’s work and women’s work. Her multilayered linguistic and conceptual puns track nature and culture, environment and economy, through their historically specific and politically fraught changes. The resultant eco-poetics do not seek purity or advocate a dogmatic program; there are, after all, no clear-cut, easy answers in the pragmatic realm of food. Niedecker’s poems instead point contemporary ecocritics, poets, gardeners, and cooks towards an eco-poetics of food that enacts critique and explores new forms materially, through both literary and food practices.

Notes

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1. See Elizabeth Willis, “The Poetics of Affinity: Niedecker, Morris, and the Art of Work,” in *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, ed. Elizabeth Willis (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 223–46.

2. The James A. Decker Press of Prairie City, Illinois, published *New Goose* in 1946. According to her biographer, Niedecker had sent Decker the manuscript in 1944, but the war delayed publication; see Margot Peters, *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet’s Life* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 72. A separate “New Goose” manuscript, of poems that were mostly unpublished in book form in

Niedecker's lifetime, is dated 1945. However, Niedecker began writing folk poems in the mid-1930s and many of the New Goose poems were probably drafted before 1941. Earlier versions of some of them were published in *New Directions* in 1936. For the full publication history of this period, see Jenny Penberthy's notes in Niedecker's *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 372–78. Penberthy's essential edition of Niedecker's work is the only complete and reliable one. I will refer to the poems of this period collectively as the New Goose poems, reserving *New Goose* for the 1946 volume. (There is also a recent edition titled *New Goose*; in 2002, Rumor Books published Penberthy's slim collection of all the New Goose poems, arranged alphabetically without the editorial apparatus of the *Collected Works*.)

3. Louis Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry* (New York: C. Z. Publications, 1980), 81.

4. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003). The term “emergent naturecultures” emphasizes the ways in which nature and culture are inextricable and always emerging together from entangled histories: “co-constitution, finitude, impurity, historicity, and complexity are what is” (16).

5. The environmental humanities include work in environmental philosophy, environmental history, geography, anthropology, ecocriticism, and related fields. For an overview of this emergent interdisciplinary field, see *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, ed. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (New York: Routledge, 2017).

6. On the gendered split between production and consumption in humanistic scholarship on food, see Allison Carruth, *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). 8. According to Catriona Sandilands, critical plant studies attend to “plants’ complex sensoria, communicative abilities, interspecies networks, and modes of memory and movement” in order to understand “how our biopolitical relations to plants involve complex configurations of interaction between and among specific plant and human capacities” (Catriona Sandilands, “Dog Stranglers in the Park? National and Vegetal Politics in Ontario’s Rouge Valley,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 47, no. 3 [2013]: 93–122, 115–16).

7. I build on critical debates that have found “ecopoetics” and “ecopoetry” more useful than “nature poetry” as terms for environmental poetry that ranges formally from mainstream lyric to linguistic experiment. See *The Eco-poetry Anthology*, ed. Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2013); *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, ed. J. Scott Bryson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002); and Lynn Keller, “Green Reading: Modern and Contemporary American Poetry and Environmental Criticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 602–23.

8. Kenneth Cox was the first to note the way in which Niedecker’s short poems turn on concealed puns; see Kenneth Cox, “The Poems of Lorine Niedecker,” in *The Full Note: Lorine Niedecker*, ed. Peter Dent (Budleigh Slaterton, UK: Interim Press, 1983), 29–35, 32.

9. Farming is always a multispecies endeavor. Despite agricultural discourses that pretend to human mastery, agriculture nonetheless relies on particular nonhuman capacities that escape complete human control.

10. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Lorine Niedecker’s ‘Paean to Place’ and its Reflective Fusions,” in *Radical Vernacular*, 151–79, 170.

11. Jonathan Skinner, “Thoughts on Things: Poetics of the Third Landscape,” in *((eco(lang) (uage(reader)): the eco language reader*, ed. Brenda Iijima (New York: Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs, 2010), 9–51, 17, emphasis in original.

12. Jonathan Skinner, “Particular Attention: Lorine Niedecker’s Natural Histories,” in *Radical Vernacular*, 41–59. While Skinner was the first to write of Niedecker’s “ecopoetics,” other critics have analyzed her approach to the natural world. See especially Donald Davie, “Lorine Niedecker: Lyric Minimum and Epic Scope,” in *The Full Note*, 64–73; John Freeman, “Blood from the Stone: A Reading of Lake Superior,” in *The Full Note*, 74–85; Douglas Crase, “Niedecker and the Evolutionary Sublime,” in *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1996), 327–44; Richard Caddel, “Consider: Lorine Niedecker and Her Environment,” in *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, 281–86; and Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

13. Allison Carruth, "War Rations and the Food Politics of Late Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 4 (2009): 767–95. See also chapter three of Carruth's *Global Appetites*.

14. While Carruth, Skinner, and Michael Davidson have analyzed the New Goose poems from an ecocritical perspective, these poems have received far less attention than Niedecker's later long poems and her early surrealist work, despite—or perhaps because of—their brevity, humor, and charm.

15. Michael Davidson, "Life by Water: Lorine Niedecker and Critical Regionalism," in *Radical Vernacular*, 3–20.

16. Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Wisconsin, *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1941), 95. This state guidebook was recently reprinted under the title, *The WPA Guide to Wisconsin: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s Wisconsin* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006).

17. See Michael Hiltzik, *The New Deal: A Modern History* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 96; and Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutsch, Owen Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig, "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 81–98.

18. See Bruce L. Gardner, *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How it Flourished and What it Cost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4–6; and Randall S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 167.

19. Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 147.

20. Theodore Saloutos and John D. Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent in the Middle West, 1900–1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951), 8, 9–13.

21. In 1885, William Dempster Hoard began publishing *Hoard's Dairyman* in Fort Atkinson to advocate dairy farming because the "continued planting of soil-depleting grains was destroying land fertility" (*Wisconsin: A Guide*, 490–91). Niedecker worked as a proofreader for *Hoard's* from 1944 to 1950. The WPA's *Wisconsin* guide does not attribute authorship of its chapters and sections to individual writers. Penberthy and Peters disagree about whether Niedecker contributed to the *Wisconsin* guide, but, as part of the cohesive group of Federal Writers' Project workers in Madison, Niedecker would have been familiar with the guide's contents (see *Collected Works*, 372 and *Lorine Niedecker: A Poet's Life*, 63).

22. Aldo Leopold also understood Wisconsin's move towards dairying as a partially successful attempt to slow erosion and fertility loss: "When the empire of wheat collapsed, the settler took a leaf from the old prairie book: he impounded his fertility in livestock" (*A Sand County Almanac* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1966], 115).

23. On Grangerism and LaFollette, see Saloutos and Hicks, *Agricultural Discontent*, 33–40. On cooperative marketing associations among dairy farmers, see Gardner, *American Agriculture*, 203–4. On republican ideals, see Jess Gilbert, "Eastern Urban Liberals and Midwestern Agrarian Intellectuals: Two Group Portraits of Progressives in the New Deal Department of Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 74, no. 2 (2000): 162–80, 165–66.

24. On the role of the University of Wisconsin in the development and administration of New Deal agricultural policies, see Jess Gilbert and Ellen Baker, "Wisconsin Economists and New Deal Agricultural Policy: The Legacy of Progressive Professors," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 80, no. 4 (1997): 280–312.

25. Jean Choate, *Disputed Ground: Farm Groups That Opposed the New Deal Agricultural Program* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 40–71.

26. Ann Folino White, *Plowed Under: Food Policy Protests and Performance in New Deal America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 65–110. For "public welfare" milk, see pages 66, 68–69, 82.

27. Lorine Niedecker, "In the great snowfall before the bomb," in *Collected Works*, 142–43.

28. This poem was not published in Niedecker's lifetime; it appears in the unpublished "New Goose" manuscript, which is dated 1945 but includes an "opening letter/poem" dated 1943 (*Collected Works*, 110).

29. Thanks to G. Matthew Jenkins for pointing this last pun out to me.

30. This poem was unpublished in book form in Niedecker's lifetime and appears in the "Mother Goose" manuscript probably sent to *Poetry* in 1936 (Penberthy, *Collected Works*, 372).

31. G. Matthew Jenkins, "Lorine Niedecker, Simone de Beauvoir, and the Sexual Ethics of Experience," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 23, no. 2 (2004): 311–37, 321.

32. Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 26–29.

33. For example, Niedecker sent a note to a local friend with a copy of the 1946 *New Goose*, "to ask that it be kept mum—folks might put up a wall if they knew ('she writes poetry, queer bird, etc. . . .') and I have to be among 'em to hear 'em talk so I can write some more!" (quoted in Jane Shaw Knox, *Lorine Niedecker: An Original Biography* [Fort Atkinson, WI: Dwight Foster Public Library, 1987], 20).

34. Carruth, in *Global Appetites*, reads this poem as if it referred to wartime rationing (58). However, this reading risks misdating the poem; Niedecker had started composing *New Goose* poems by early 1936, if not before (Penberthy, *Collected Works*, 372–78).

35. See Hiltzik, *The New Deal*, 100–12 and Badger, *The New Deal*, 147–69. While the New Deal's agricultural policy makers considered the AAA a temporary, emergency solution to be replaced by a federal land-use planning program, ironically direct price supports were the only parts of the New Deal agricultural program that survived (Hiltzik, *The New Deal*, 110; Gilbert, "Eastern Urban Liberals," 179–80). These have evolved into the federal subsidies for "big ag" that we still have in the United States today.

36. Carruth notes the pun on a "'quack' idea" (*Global Appetites*, 58).

37. Maud Grieve, Merritt Lyndon Fernald, and Alfred Kinsey cite an eighteenth-century British botanist, William Withering, who wrote, "The roots dried and ground to make meal, have been used to make bread in years of scarcity" (Maud Grieve, *A Modern Herbal: The Medicinal, Culinary, Cosmetic and Economic Properties, Cultivation and Folk-Lore of Herbs, Grasses, Fungi, Shrubs & Trees with All Their Modern Scientific Uses*, [London: Jonathan Cape, 1931], 1:370; Merritt Lyndon Fernald and Alfred Charles Kinsey, *Edible Wild Plants of Eastern North America* [Cornwall-on-Hudson, UK: Idlewild Press, 1943], 95).

38. In "Particular Attention," Skinner quotes the first stanza of this poem and concludes, "Niedecker's sustained practical relationship to her surroundings embraces a technology forbidden environmental purists" (43).

39. Beeman and Pritchard show how the Dust Bowl and worldwide concern about soil erosion in the 1930s gave rise to many "soil jeremiads" such as Pare Lorentz's film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) (*A Green and Permanent Land*, 13).

40. Edward Faulkner, *Plowman's Folly* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1943).

41. Niedecker's other laundry poem, "The clothesline post is set," with its closing line, "hang or fall by the whiteness of their all," reinforces this interpretation (*Collected Works*, 100). See Elizabeth Savage, "'Bleach[ed] Brotherhood': Race, Consumer Advertising, and Lorine Niedecker's Lyric," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 28, no. 2 (2009): 291–313.

42. Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 250–52. See also Stephen Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 71–99.

43. Craig Summers Black, "America's Forgotten Fruit: The Native Pawpaw Tastes like Banana and Grows Close to Home," *The Christian Science Monitor* 101, no. 44 (2009): 17.

44. On the so-called Black Hawk War, see Ronald N. Satz, "Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era: The Old Northwest as a Test Case," *Michigan History* 60, no. 1 (1976): 71–93, 75.

45. After his capture, Black Hawk told his life story to an interpreter; in 1833, it became the first Native American autobiography published in the United States: *The Life of Black Hawk, or Ma-kai-tai-me-she-kia-kiak: Dictated by Himself*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (New York: Penguin, 2008).

46. For a compelling argument that Western rationalism should not be identified with reason, see Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1–37.

47. These “removals” ranged from the Potawatomi Trail of Death in 1838 to the removal of Miami on canal boats in 1848 (Satz, “Indian Policy,” 81). Historian Stewart Rafert uses terms like “deportation” and “ethnic cleansing” alongside the term “removal” (*The Miami Indians of Indiana: A Persistent People, 1654–1994* [Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996], 91, 95). For an argument that Indian removal was an integral part of the development of commercial agriculture in the Midwest, see Ginette Aley, “Bringing About the Dawn: Agriculture, Internal Improvements, Indian Policy, and Euro-American Hegemony in the Old Northwest, 1800–1846,” in *The Boundaries between Us: Natives and Newcomers along the Frontiers of the Old Northwest Territory, 1750–1850*, ed. Daniel P. Barr (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 196–218.

48. John Donne, “The Canonization,” in *The Collected Poems of John Donne*, ed. Roy Booth (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 6–7, 7.

49. Richard Dart, “Settlement of Green Lake County,” in *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin at its 57th Annual Meeting Held Oct. 21, 1909* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1910), 252–72. An online facsimile is available through the Wisconsin Historical Society at content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/45061.

50. See Stephen Pyne, “Fire,” in *A Companion to American Environmental History*, ed. Douglas Cazaus Sackman (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 69–91, 74–75; and Omer C. Stewart, *Forgotten Fires: Native Americans and the Transient Wilderness*, ed. Henry T. Lewis and M. Kat Anderson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 126–29.

51. Niedecker’s source appears to be Alexander Kaun’s *Maxim Gorky and His Russia* (New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1931).

52. There is not space here for a full reading of the poem, which undermines techno-optimism in part by ringing the changes, Christian and otherwise, on “rise” and “rising,” “sons” and “sun.”

53. For an account of how defining agriculture as grain monoculture keeps scholars from recognizing indigenous forms of agriculture as such, see Susanna B. Hecht, “Domestication, Domesticated Landscapes, and Tropical Natures,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, 21–34.

54. Carruth, in *Global Appetites*, points out that the genre of “locavore memoir” has taken off in the last decade or so, but organic farming and local food movements have long been literary (154–68). To take only the most prominent examples, the poet Wendell Berry has fundamentally shaped food movements in the United States since the 1970s through his books and essays on sustainable agriculture, and Michael Pollan’s books and articles on food and cooking since *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) have done much to popularize such movements.

55. See *Collected Works*, 232–38, 247–57, 261–69, 430, 434, 441.

56. Jenny Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky 1931–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3–118; and see also DuPlessis, “Lorine Niedecker’s ‘Paean to Place.’”

57. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 36.

58. *OED Online*, March 2017, s.v., “condensery, n.”

59. Greta Gaard, “Toward a Feminist Postcolonial Milk Studies,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2013): 595–618.

60. A facsimile of Lorine Niedecker’s *Cooking Book* is available online through the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. See “Cooking Book,” The State of Wisconsin Collection, *University of Wisconsin Digital Collections*, digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.FACooking.