

AMBIENT TEXTUALITY, TEXTUALITY AS AMBIENCE

Metaphor and Materiality in the Writing of Tan Lin

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	1
INTRODUCTION	2
[Interlude: on method]	13
1. THE PROBLEM OF AMBIENCE	16
2. AUTOMATIC SUBSTITUTION	39
3. READING THE GENERIC	67
4. ECOLOGY, ABSENCE, LIFE, DEATH, PATIO	99
CONCLUSION	118
BIBLIOGRAPHY	123

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INTRODUCTION

What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of literature that didn't have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading.

—Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING THEORY FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]*.¹

They, along with the moss that we also liked to transplant, reminded my father and me of a blanket made by nature and came to stand in my mind for the wall-to-wall carpeting in our house, and so, in a sense, the woods for me were always carpeted just as our house was, and the life of the woods around our house was in a continual cycle of self-domestication and perpetual greening, which I associated with reading and families. Reading repaired something like nature or our house, and nature, like our family memories, was carpeted like a piece of handiwork.

—Tan Lin, *The Patio and the Index*.²

Both of these epigraphs will recur throughout this thesis. They will reappear at various moments surrounded by my own writing, formatted slightly differently, or with a few words added or subtracted, or with almost every word replaced for another, similar word. The reader might become familiar with the outline of these two paragraphs—the pattern of the letters, the shape of the sentences—and, if reading inattentively enough, the blocks of text might begin to register automatically, and increasingly so with each iteration, only as a vague recognition of the

¹ Tan Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING THEORY FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 16.

² Tan Lin, *The Patio and the Index*, *Triple Canopy* 14 (2011), accessed April 7, 2024, https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the_patio_and_the_index?ui.header=true, unpaginated.

sameness and difference that make each version both substitutable with and nonidentical to the last.

This would be what I will call a kind of “ambient reading,” a process which, I wish to argue, these epigraphs both describe and perform. Both passages *describe* a mechanism of “reading” that appears to function relationally and systemically rather than as an internal operation of a discrete “reader”: the description of “forms of non-reading” or “non-forms [of] reading” in the first epigraph contains no reading subject (leaving aside the exasperating poet), and the second passage, although describing the mental processes of a first-person narrator, makes oblique reference to a “reading” with more broadly ‘ecological’ implications, “repair[ing] something like nature or our house.” Both passages also *perform* an abstract circulation of signs by means of a somewhat obscure process of equivalence and differentiation: for example, “Poetry = wallpaper” or “forms of non-reading and ... non-forms a reading” in the first, or the heightening confusion of the semantic difference between “woods,” “house,” and “nature” in the second. Definitive “meaning” becomes instead diffuse, the boundaries that separate one sign from another increasingly mutable.

The epigraphs are taken from the first poem in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING THEORY FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]* (2010, hereafter *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*) and the last chapter of *The Patio and the Index* (2011), respectively—the two works by contemporary poet, writer, and artist Tan Lin that are the subject of this thesis. Lin has called his writing an “ambient textuality,”³ and in a 2011 artist statement described his overall

³ Tan Lin and Katherine Elaine Sanders, “Tan Lin by Katherine Elaine Sanders,” *BOMB* (2010), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/tan-lin/>.

artistic project as the production of an “‘ambient’ literature; really a mode of literature rather than a recognizable genre.”⁴ Lin thus situates his work within a legacy of “ambient” media, a term popularized via electronic musician Brian Eno’s “ambient music” in the 1970s. In the liner notes to his album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, Eno defines “ambience” as “an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint.”⁵ Ambient music, then, is “environmental music” that may be “suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres” and that “must be able to accom[m]odate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular”: “it must,” writes Eno, “be as ignorable as it is interesting.”⁶

In recent decades, “ambience” has emerged also in scholarly discourses aiming to theorize our contemporary condition—specifically, the effects of the increasing ubiquity of networked information technologies, on the one hand, and the acceleration of climate change, on the other. Recognizing these paradigm shifts as rendering obsolete the notion of an ‘autonomous,’ ‘sovereign’ subject, theories of ambience aim to redefine “being,” broadly speaking, as a fundamentally environmental and relational process. Accordingly, scholars from diverse fields including philosophy, literary theory, sociology, ecocriticism, and media studies have turned to the term “ambience” to describe a state of diffuse perception of one’s surroundings *prior* to the emergence of subjectivity. This low-grade sense of awareness is

⁴ Tan Lin, “Tan Lin | FCA Grant Recipient” (2011), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/tan-lin/#:~:text=Artist%20Statement,%2C%20and%20literary%20criticism%2Fpoetics>.

⁵ Brian Eno, *Music for Airports / Ambient 1*, liner notes (Polydor: 1978).

⁶ Ibid.

varyingly identified as “presubjective,”⁷ “pre-conscious,”⁸ or “pre-reflective,”⁹ and is thus, crucially, non-interpretive¹⁰ or “prior to symbolicity.”¹¹ In lending primary significance to affective and sensory phenomena that weaken the boundaries of the “self,” theories of ambience aim to annul the distinction between binaries such as “subject” and “object,”¹² “nature” and “culture,”¹³ or “figure” and “ground.”¹⁴ This phenomenological state is thus proposed as a window into what Mark Hansen, Thomas Rickert, and Timothy Morton have called, respectively, an “originary ‘environmental condition,’” an “a priori weddedness to the world,” and “a world without a center or edge that includes everything.”¹⁵

The theoretical argument of my thesis, however, is that by positioning the perceptual field as forever ontologically prior to discursivity, existing theories of ambience construct a paradoxical reliance upon a “primordial” unity of the sensible that only *reinforces* the metaphysical opposition between nature and culture, language and materiality, that ambience would ostensibly seek to dissolve.¹⁶ I thus turn to Tan Lin’s “ambient textuality” to construct an alternate theory of ambience that illuminates the relational, pre-individual, and pre-conscious nature of semiotic structure itself, placing symbolic relations not in opposition to, but

⁷ Mark Hansen, “Ubiquitous Sensation: Toward an Atmospheric, Collective, and Microtemporal Model of Media,” in *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging With Ubiquitous Computing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 84.

⁸ Alec Mapes-Frances, “Reading Machines: Ambient Writing and the Poetics of Atmospheric Media” (2017), accessed on April 7, 2024, <https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:697855/>, 14; and Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), xi.

⁹ Jean-Paul Thibaud, “From situated perception to urban ambiances,” First international Workshop on Architectural and Urban Ambient Environment (Nantes, 2002), 4.

¹⁰ Thibaud, “From situated perception to urban ambiances,” 4.

¹¹ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 30.

¹² Timothy Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics? Outline for a Depthless Ecology,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 33, no. 1 (2002), 52; Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 1; Ulrik Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” in *Throughout* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 176.

¹³ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, xxi.

¹⁴ Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” 177.

¹⁵ Hansen, “Ubiquitous Sensation,” 84; Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 185; Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics?,” 52.

¹⁶ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 14.

constitutionally inextricable from the materiality of experience.

In the chapters to come, I analyze *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and *The Patio and the Index* as two different iterations of the same logic of *reading*, which comes into being as an encounter with the diffuse, systematic, and co-implicating operations of *metaphor* and *materiality*. Lin's work, I argue, proposes "reading" as a varyingly attentive or non-attentive experience of the world not only through, but *as*, semiotic structure. Signification in Lin's writing is structured by the substitutability of "signs," a term which here expands beyond language, first to images, and then to objects in the world at large. Furthermore, "reading" emerges as *system* because this process occurs independently of any sovereign, individual reader-writer. I suggest that becoming 'acclimated' not only to the ambient nature of discursivity, but also to the *discursive nature of ambience* opens up greater potential for ambience as a critically productive state.

In the remaining pages of my introduction, I will give an overview of existing criticism of Lin's work and outline my intervention into this scholarship before providing a brief summary of the four chapters of my thesis.

In interviews and writing from the years surrounding the publication of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and *The Patio and the Index*, Lin positions the stakes of his own work at the intersection of avant-garde poetics and new media studies. He cites media theorist Lev Manovich as an inspiration, stating that "avant-garde principles" of writing—for example, plagiarism, fragmented language, nonlinear structure, and the combination of academic and commercial genre signifiers—"have become [so] integrated" into daily life with the predominance of computer software and online culture so as not to be 'shocking' or 'experimental' anymore at

all.¹⁷ Lin thus describes his project as an effort to “relax the avant-garde.”¹⁸ “Working against avant-garde notions of difficulty,”¹⁹ his writing aims instead to “seamless[ly]” integrate these techniques into a style that is “hypnotic,” “relaxing,” and “boring”—or, “ambient.”²⁰

Lin’s earlier works inaugurate many of his stylistic trademarks; the “Preface” to *BlipSoak01* (2003) is peppered with dry meta-declarations about the purpose of art (“poetry should not be difficult it should be very very easy and deeply relaxing at the synaptic level, which is the level of looking”²¹), and *HEATH: plagiarism/outsourcing* (2009) is made up of images and text ripped from both on- and offline contexts, preserving their original font, formatting, and/or (often low) resolution to create a reading experience that blurs visual and textual interpretation. “Ambiance,” Lin states in a 2010 interview with Colin Marshall, “was, for me, a way of dealing in a sort of avant-garde or experimental context with some of these ideas, and to diffuse them.”²²

Given Lin’s evident interest in the formal effects of the internet on reading practices and the “commodification of attention” in contemporary culture, most criticism of his work discusses “ambient textuality” as a mode of grappling with the ambivalent experience of networked subjectivity under neoliberal technocapitalism.²³ Jennifer Scappettone, for example, argues that the repetitive, “soothing” praise of commercialized boredom in works like *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*—for example, “It would be nice if the book could be less spatially kinetic and

¹⁷ Lin, “Tan Lin by Katherine Elaine Sanders.”

¹⁸ Tan Lin, “PLAGIARISM: A response to Thomas Fink,” *Otoliths* (2009), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://the-otolith.blogspot.com/2009/06/tan-lin-plagiarism-response-to-thomas.html>.

¹⁹ Lin, “Tan Lin | FCA Grant Recipient.”

²⁰ Lin, “Tan Lin by Katherine Elaine Sanders.”

²¹ Tan Lin, *BlipSoak01* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2003), 17.

²² Tan Lin and Colin Marshall, “Ambiently breaking reading conventions: Colin Marshall talks to experimental poet Tan Lin,” *3 Quarks Daily* (2010), accessed April 5, 2024, <https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/07/ambiently-breaking-reading-conventions-colin-marshall-talks-to-experimental-poet-tan-lin.html>.

²³ Lin, “Tan Lin | FCA Grant Recipient.”

more boring, like a mailbox with a name on it or a billboard”²⁴—ironically critiques ambience as a method of control by making itself “effectively indistinguishable” from techniques of subconscious “manipulation.”²⁵ Alec Mapes-Frances situates Lin’s “ambient poetics” within a broader study of ambient media. Drawing from affect theory, studies of ubiquitous computing, and postmodern “atmospheric” artistic techniques, he argues that Lin’s work “provocatively poeticizes the consumer atmospherics and ambient technologies of control, confronting us with spaces and durations of the present, and allowing us to imagine what spaces and durations ‘we might not have inhabited.’”²⁶ Some scholarship, especially in more recent years, analyzes this affective flatness in the context of Lin’s status as a first-generation Asian American writer; Sunny S. Y. Chan argues that his use of “experimental and electronic forms” attains special resonance when the “fragmented selves and non-straightforward relationships to language” it produces are read as “major aspects of the diasporic experience.”²⁷

The majority of this scholarship locates the “ambience” of Lin’s work in its de-hierarchized mode of textual assemblage and/or its production of an ambient environment for the reader, citing, for example, his use of “elements from Twitter, news feeds, [G]oogle search results, and blog posts as well as post-it notes or cookbooks” as an attention to the “porous[ness] to the networks of textuality that enmesh us,”²⁸ or his use of found images from the internet as

²⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 80.

²⁵ Jennifer Scappettone, “Versus Seamlessness: Architectonics of Pseudocomplicity in Tan Lin’s Ambient Poetics,” *boundary 2* 36:3 (2009), 75.

²⁶ Mapes-Frances, “Reading Machines,” 15, quoting Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 62.

²⁷ Sunny S. Y. Chan, “Experimental Poetics of the Asian Diaspora: Readings in Meatspace and Cyberspace” (2018), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/experimental-poetics-asian-diaspora-readings/docview/2128021883/se-2> 163.

²⁸ Jonathan Dovey, Tom Abba, and Kate Pullinger, “Introduction,” in *Ambient Literature: Towards a New Poetics of Situated Writing and Reading Practices* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 4.

producing what Kristen Gallagher calls a “text and image *environment*.”²⁹ Lin himself has echoed these sentiments, stating in one interview that he wished to “make the boundary between what’s inside a book and [what’s] outside as porous and as permeable as possible.”³⁰

While very valuable for their illustrations of the way in which ambient media, as a category generally downstream from Eno’s “ambient music,” might function as a site of ambiguous cultural critique, these analyses do not grapple with the problem the notion of an ambient *writing* poses to the concept of “ambience” as such—which, as I have noted, rests on a fundamental opposition between the symbolic and phenomenological realms. In my thesis, I therefore aim to show that Lin’s “ambient textuality” attunes us not only to the materiality of text, but to the *textuality of the material*. In other words, I argue that his work theorizes the ambience of semiotic structure itself—its inherent ability to function non-consciously and autonomously of an individual’s control—as well as the ways in which textuality is at work in material and perceptual experience.

Drawing from Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of language, I posit that the figure of “reading” in Lin’s work is illustrated as a fundamental encounter with the world as constructed through an endless play of signs via the mechanism of substitution, or metaphor. I argue that the ambient nature of signification—its ability to become a diffuse and automatic mode of experience—functions in his texts as a mechanism predicted upon a certain *absence* of identifiable origin or end, or what one of the poems in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* calls a “*fonctionnalité absent*” (“absent functionality/function”).³¹ I am thus not so much interested in

²⁹ Kristen Gallagher, “The Authorship of Heath Ledger in the New Reading Environment; on Tan Lin’s *HEATH: Plagiarism/Outsource*,” *Criticism* 51 (Fall 2009), 701 (my emphasis).

³⁰ Lin, “Ambiently breaking reading conventions.”

³¹ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 70.

examining the way in which Lin's writing might engender a phenomenologically ambient *experience* in the reader, or in tracing its similarities and differences to other forms of ambient media; rather, I wish to investigate the way in which it both illustrates and enacts a new mode, or *theory*, of ambience that takes as its starting point the co-implication of materiality and signification.

This redefinition of ambience has important implications for its potential as a critical mode. Negative critiques of ambience, most notably by Seth Kim-Cohen and Timothy Morton (who himself theorized the concept of “ambient poetics” cited by many other scholars), criticize its privileging of undifferentiated, non-interpretive connection as reinforcing an ideology of political passivity.³² This critique is also registered in Lin's work, which remains ultimately ambivalent as to ambience's relation to power. I hope to show, however, that the attunement to the ambient textual structure of our environment—both discursive and perceptual—that Lin's writing presents might also function as a state of heightened awareness of the *contingency* of those same relations, and thus their potential to be altered. My close reading of Lin's so-called “sampled novel” *The Patio and the Index*, a work that has gone largely unnoticed by critics and scholars alike,³³ will be crucial for this unfolding of the implicit politics of ambience.

Additionally, through my engagement of the novel, which takes ecological life as a central motif, I aim to show the relevance of Lin's writing not only to media studies discourses, but also to ecocritical conceptions of ambience, which (to my knowledge) has never been written about.³⁴

³² See Seth Kim-Cohen, “Against Ambience,” in *Against Ambience and Other Essays* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 32.

³³ Save for a short online review by Peter Nowogrodzki, which I will engage with in my analysis of *The Patio and the Index* in Chapter 3: (<https://www.full-stop.net/2012/07/09/features/essays/peter-nowogrodzki/inalienable-resurrection-tan-lins-the-patio-and-the-index/>).

³⁴ This is especially important considering that the most influential theory of ambient *language*—Timothy Morton's “ambient poetics”—is situated explicitly within ecocriticism and environmental ethics.

In Chapter 1, “The Problem of Ambience,” I give an overview of relevant existing theories of “ambience” and the cultural paradigm within which they operate, taking as my primary focus scholars writing on the relationship between ambience and language—Timothy Morton, Thomas Rickert, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht.³⁵ I show that existing theories of ambience rely upon the notion of sensory experience as an originary state of *unity* with the environment that is prior to language, and I argue that this opposition between symbolic structure and the material field contradicts these theories’ aims to abolish the mind-body, nature-culture binary. I then introduce Tan Lin’s *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and *The Patio and the Index* and illustrate the ways in which the “ambient textuality” or “ambient reading” put forth in those texts complicates the boundary between the semiotic and the material.

In Chapter 2, “Automatic Substitution,” I read *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* as putting in place a logic of world-as-expanded-textual-system, operating via a seemingly universal, programmatic exchange of signs. “Reading” thus comes to mean neither an interior activity nor a discrete event, but a continual, systemic process that can occur independently of any single reading individual. I trace the figure—or metaphor—of “sign-as-information” in the text, not only to illustrate the way in which Lin ambivalently portrays an extreme state of mechanized “ambient reading” under the paradigm of networked communication technologies and new media, but also to show how the ‘automatic’ quality of this reading exposes the ambient *technicity of language* (or, more broadly, systems of signification) *as such*.

In Chapter 3, “Reading the Generic,” I begin my two-chapter analysis of *The Patio and the Index* as a ‘local’ instantiation of the “ambient reading” formulated more abstractly in *Seven*

³⁵ As I note in Chapter 1, Gumbrecht does not use the word “ambience,” but his book *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (2012) outlines an extremely similar concept.

Controlled Vocabularies. I show how the same logic of substitutability of signs pervades the work, allowing for the diffuse, non-hierarchized, and non-individual nature of signification to emerge even in an ostensibly ‘subject-centered’ form such as the novel. Drawing from the field of novel theory and Derrida’s essay “The Law of Genre,” I argue that the work’s meta-commentary on the construction of narrative in the traditional novel, as well as its ambient reconceptualization thereof, reveals the paradoxical nature of “genre” itself, used here as an expanded term for classificatory symbolic relations. The ambient play of signs in *The Patio and the Index*, I argue, both portrays the material, ideological effects of the “generic” and exposes the fundamental precarity of its logic.

In Chapter 4, “Ecology, Absence, Life, Death, Patio,” I analyze how the indefinite and transformative nature of semiotic structure emerges in *The Patio and the Index* as aligned with the processes of organic life, thereby positioning textuality as a way of understanding the fundamental ecological relation between systems of “being.” I also show how the novel illustrates the material implications of a textual world motivated by absence(s), figured in the novel through signs such as “desire” and “death.” Finally, in my conclusion, I grapple with the question of the possibility of ambience as a critical or (eco-)political mode.

[Interlude: on method]

Before I begin Chapter 1, I must address one final instantiation of “reading”: my own. I have written in my introduction that this thesis involves an engagement with certain works by Tan Lin through “close reading,” a method often described as an attention to the particular over the general; the making-explicit of previously implicit links between elements in a text in order to ascertain a ‘meaning.’ It is true, however, that “close reading” is precisely what Lin’s work tells the reader *not* to do. One poem in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* advises, “Reading like consumption should be very fast and very hypnotic and very wasteful of the actual time of reading so that one doesn’t really know what one is reading or consuming or throwing away at the moment one is throwing it away.”³⁶ Even Lin himself has said that *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* “is designed so that it can be read quickly ... it’s very, very easy to read.”³⁷

If we were to read the work ‘how it tells us to read,’ perhaps a sort of ‘skimming’ would be more appropriate; or a method of “critical description” Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best call “surface reading”;³⁸ or something akin to Franco Moretti’s “distant reading,” wherein “distance,” produced by the increasing critical reliance upon “a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*,” allows the reader to “focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems.”³⁹

³⁶ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 100.

³⁷ Lin, “Ambiently breaking reading conventions.”

³⁸ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009), 11.

³⁹ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London ; New York: Verso, 2013), 57.

All of these forms of reading are, certainly, at least partially constitutive of the critique, or “reading,” I perform in this thesis. I must also note, though, that *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and *The Patio and the Index* (perhaps, one might argue, no more or less so than any other text) cannot be entirely trusted to tell us, ‘on the surface,’ how they ‘want’ to be read. In *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, any declarative statement might be repeated with its terms substituted, or contradicted altogether, a few pages later. Take, for example, the opposition one poem makes between images and text—“The best movies would consist only of words or letters. Unlike images, letters never change”—and its continual subversion throughout the rest of the book: “The best paintings, like words, expire like photographs of themselves,” or “A beautiful poem is a painting that can be repeated over and over again.”⁴⁰ The same is true of *The Patio and the Index*, though to a less explicit extent, as I will show in the second half of the thesis.

Lin’s writing eschews linearity and traditional narrative for a process-driven, iterative method of meaning-making through repetitions, substitutions, and contradictions. Just as no signifier has a static ‘meaning,’ no single sentence or passage can be taken as an interpretive ‘key’ that unlocks an ‘idea’ that the work as a whole ‘communicates.’ This also, however, makes it impossible to “describe [the text] accurately” or “simply paraphras[e]” the book in order “to register what the text itself is saying,” to quote Marcus and Best.⁴¹ Indeed, I share Ellen Rooney’s view that such an “objective[ly]” descriptive reading is impossible as such.⁴² It not possible to “read” a “text” without becoming attuned in some way to its modes or structures of signification: exactly this is what I am about to argue Lin’s “ambient reading” makes evident. It

⁴⁰ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 211, 40, 32.

⁴¹ Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” 16, 10, 8.

⁴² Ibid., 17.

is even less possible to do so and advance an argument, an interpretation, a critique—a “reading”—as I am explicitly trying to do in this thesis, and as I have already done in my introduction.

It will be unavoidable, of course, to make certain claims about the works’ “content.” However, what is important here, and what my argument hinges upon, is Lin’s engagement with *form*. Form, meaning here how signs repeat and differ, how marks appear on the page, “the double meaning that appears on the *surface* of the text.”⁴³ In “Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form,” Rooney writes:

Form as a productive consequence of reading disrupts the distinction between description and analysis, reading and writing, inside and outside, surface and depth; it generates a disorienting doubleness of meaning *on a single plane*, the “substitution” that is the play on words.⁴⁴

Form *is itself* that which causes a shift in preconceived boundaries, which throws into question the very oppositions that many notions of ambience ostensibly resolve into unity. And it does this whether we are close or distant, skimming or describing, reading for surface or for depth.

P.S.

*I did not write this thesis with the skimming reader in mind, but feel free to do so!
It might even be better that way.*

⁴³ Ellen Rooney, “Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form,” *differences* 21, no. 3 (2010), 129. My argument here largely follows Rooney’s analysis of Marcus and Best via Althusser.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 132 (emphasis in original).

1. THE PROBLEM OF AMBIENCE

In recent decades, a host of scholars have used the concept of “ambience,” popularized by Brian Eno in the 1970s with his designation “ambient music,” to theorize the construction and dissolution of subjectivity under contemporary experiences of postmodernity, neoliberalism, environmental crisis, and the ubiquity of networked information technologies. In this chapter, I provide a brief survey of relevant theoretical definitions of ambience, showing their general reliance on the notion of a pre-conscious unity of sensory experience as primary to, and thus liberating from, conscious interpretation and signification. I then position Tan Lin’s “ambient textuality” as an alternate approach to ambience that, by figuring non-conscious engagement with the world through semiotic structure, foregrounds the inseparability of materiality and language.

The word “ambient” comes from the Latin *ambīre*, meaning “to go around” (*amb-*, “on both sides,” “around,” “about” + *īre*, “to go”). Accordingly, ambience describes what media scholar Ulrik Schmidt has defined as an “*effect characterized by an intensification of the experience of being surrounded.*”⁴⁵ Theories of ambience tend to emphasize “immediate, pre-reflective” aspects of being,⁴⁶ lending primacy to what Timothy Morton calls “perceptual event[s]” over conscious thought.⁴⁷ Jean-Paul Thibaud posits that “ambience puts us in immediate contact with a situation *in its entirety*,”⁴⁸ and thus “involves ... an *ecological*

⁴⁵ Ulrik Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” 175.

⁴⁶ Thibaud, “From situated perception to urban ambiances,” 4.

⁴⁷ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press: 2007), 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 (my emphasis).

approach to perception.”⁴⁹ In positing a unity between a thing perceiving and the surroundings being perceived, these scholars argue, ambience initiates the dissolution of the division between subject and object, “bring[ing] together nature and culture, earth and body” in an explicit provocation to Cartesian mind-body dualism.⁵⁰

Ambience has clear stakes in contemporary culture. Rickert notes the fact that “digital technologies are increasingly enmeshed with our everyday environment” as evidence of our inauguration into “an *age of ambience*, one in which boundaries between subject and object, human and nonhuman, and information and matter dissolve.”⁵¹ This sentiment is echoed in posthuman scholarship such as Donna Haraway’s famous “Cyborg Manifesto,” relevant for our purposes for its bridging of the technological, ecological, and textual. “Late twentieth-century machines,” Haraway writes, “have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed,” thereby dismantling the oppositions “human/animal,” “organism/machine,” and “physical/nonphysical.”⁵² In foregrounding a conception of the individual ‘self’ as inherently *constructed* in relation to the surrounding environment, ambience is a useful term to discuss ways in which the notion of the transcendental subject has become increasingly problematic from modernity to the present.

Schmidt uses “ambience” to describe a mode of aesthetic experience inaugurated by ubiquitous computing, or “ubicomp,” a term coined by Mark Weiser in 1991 that designates the embedding of computational capability into all devices, formats, and experiences of everyday

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, xii. See also Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” 176; Morton “Why Ambient Poetics?” 52.

⁵¹ Ibid., 1 (my emphasis).

⁵² Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 11.

life⁵³: a common example is the radio-frequency identification (RFID) barcode technology that links persons, animals, and buildings in a massive invisible network of data tags. Schmidt argues that the non-conscious perception of a situation no longer as “a group of interrelated objects” but as “dissolv[ing] into nonfigurativity” characterizes ambience as “ubiquitous” in the same manner as the assimilation of computation into everyday sensory experience.⁵⁴

Schmidt’s discussion of ubicomp raises the problem of the exponential increase in scope of surveillance capitalism in the 21st century, under which we see the full realization of what Gilles Deleuze famously declared the “control society” in 1995. Expanding upon Michel Foucault’s theory of “disciplinary,” institutionally based power, Deleuze posits that the 21st century’s mode of domination is the *network*, with individuals becoming “dividuals”—diffuse aggregations of data collected and analyzed by a continuously modulating mass of institutions and markets.⁵⁵ Taking a more critical view of Schmidt’s perspective, ambience can thus also be seen as an aesthetic instantiation of the diffuse, de-hierarchized control we already perceive in our daily lives.⁵⁶

The nascence of ambient media is inseparable from the acceleration of global capitalism and consumer culture. Eno cites the “background music” pioneered by Muzak LLC as an inspiration, a mix of “familiar tunes” and instrumental tracks assembled specifically for retail spaces, offices, and other public establishments (e.g. “elevator music”). Starting around the

⁵³ Mark Weiser, “The Computer for the 21st Century,” *Scientific American Magazine* Vol. 265 No. 1 (September 1991).

⁵⁴ Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” 175-7, 182-3.

⁵⁵ Deleuze, Gilles. “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 5.

⁵⁶ See Alec Mapes-Frances’ undergraduate thesis, “Reading Machines: Ambient Writing and the Poetics of Atmospheric Media” (2017), for a very thorough account of the emergence of ambient media amid postmodern culture and ubiquitous computing, as well as the way in which this cultural paradigm is figured in Lin’s work and other ambient writing.

1950s, Muzak began to popularize the commercial use of background music to strategically enhance certain behaviors in the listener through subconscious physiological effects, described by Susette Min as creating a “programmed environment that enables one to relax in order to work more efficiently, and to browse more intently in order to consume.”⁵⁷ Paul Roquet describes a more recent trend of “ambient literature” downstream from this logic, whereby the novel is conceived of as “a mood-regulating device.”⁵⁸ He identifies this repackaging of art as therapeutic technology as symptomatic of an insidious logic of self-optimization, an instantiation of the way in which neoliberalism increasingly encourages not only the laborer’s passive acceptance of *external* corporate regulation, but also the reflexive *self*-application of those same methods of control. Mitch Therieau makes a similar critique in his analysis of the commodification of “mood” as the “paradox of life on the platform,” which cultivates “a wish to harmonize our inner and outer worlds.”⁵⁹ However, “behind that wish,” he argues, “there is a creeping sense that neither of these worlds fully belongs to us, that ultimately our emotions are less regulated from within than they are manipulated from without.”⁶⁰ Ambience, as Morton remarks, is “Janus-faced.”⁶¹

On the other hand, ambience has also been taken up in various ecocritical realms of thought that aim to de-center the human subject, framed not only as a philosophical imperative but an ethical one amid the growing horrors of climate change. Morton, a literary theorist and

⁵⁷ Susette Min, “Soothe Operator: Muzak and modern sound art.” *Cabinet* (Summer 2002), accessed February 6, 2024, <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/7/min.php>

⁵⁸ Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 154.

⁵⁹ Mitch Therieau, “Vibes, Mood, Energy,” *The Drift* 6 (January 2022), accessed April 5, 2024, <https://www.thedriftmag.com/vibe-mood-energy/>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics?”, 52.

ecological philosopher, identifies an “ambient poetics” in ecological writing as the “poetic enactment of a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division, upon which depends the aggressive territorialization that precipitates ecological destruction.”⁶² Ambience is thus a “state of consciousness ... appropriate to an age of global warming” because it dismantles “the egotism that separates the human being and its life world.”⁶³

Given that ambience characterizes non-conscious experience, usually specifically material and sensory experience, however, the actual function of an ambient novel or poem appears unclear. For, how can literature be ambient if ambience is almost universally characterized as pre-symbolic and pre-interpretive? In what follows, I shall discuss a few specific theoretical conceptions of ambience in more detail, aiming to tease out the internal contradictions in the concept by focusing on those that deal with language and signification. I will then introduce the “ambient textuality” of Tan Lin’s work as an alternative perspective on ambient signification by emphasizing the ambience of discursive structure itself.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most discussions of ambient aesthetics focus on music, video, installations, or other media that *literally* act on the haptic bodily sensorium. Schmidt’s “ambient aesthetics” apply only to nonlinear, non-narrative, and non-linguistic media; he cites as examples certain genres of “weak[ly]” melodic electronic music, including Eno’s, as well as literal “atmospheres” such as the neon-light-bath sculptures of James Turrell.⁶⁴ Certain thinkers, though, have attempted to apply the concept of ambience to language. Theorist and digital language artist John Cayley, for example, has written about his own “ambient” artwork

⁶² Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics?”, 52.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” 179, 177.

overboard (2004), which he describes as a “language painting” consisting of a written text modulated over time on a screen by a morphing algorithm.⁶⁵ However, the “ambient” nature of the work appears to hinge upon the *presentation* of the words as a visual, algorithmic time-based installation, rather than the actual language itself. In a different vein, Roquet’s examples of “ambient literature” are ones in which the narrator “acts less as a self-conscious subject than as a sensing body, lending her perceptual organs to the reader.”⁶⁶ In this analysis, “ambience” comes into play as the reader’s self-projection into a *description* of ambient sensory experience.

Morton is perhaps the most influential scholar to write on the ambient qualities of language. His 2002 article “Why Ambient Poetics? Outline for a Depthless Ecology” focuses primarily on ambient experience as *content* in William Wordsworth’s poetry, rather than the ambient effects of poetic language itself, thus forgoing a rigorous *formal* explanation of ambient poetics. In his 2007 book *Ecology Without Nature*, however, Morton expands the definition of ambient poetics to refer also to a “materialist way of *reading* texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription ... the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader.”⁶⁷ Although the word on the page does not enact a *direct* haptic effect on the body like sound does, an attention to the materiality of text can still show that “the perceptual field, as awakened and provoked by what we call art[,] can make us behave differently and think differently.”⁶⁸ Morton identifies this emphasis on the materiality of language as a trend in ecopoetic writing that attempts to awaken the reader into an ethical identification with the nonhuman natural world.

⁶⁵ John Cayley, “OVERBOARD: An Example of Ambient Time-Based Poetics in digital art,” *Dichtung Digital. Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien*, Nr. 32, Jg. 6 (2004), 1.

⁶⁶ Roquet, *Ambient Media*, 165.

⁶⁷ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 3 (my emphasis).

⁶⁸ Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics?”, 2002, 56.

Two other scholars of ambient language relevant for our purposes are Thomas Rickert and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, both of whom set forth theories of interpretation based on the concept of *Stimmung*, often referred to via its formulation by Martin Heidegger. Usually translated as “attunement” or “mood,” Heidegger defines *Stimmung* as a “primordial kind of Being” state that “precedes all cognition and volition.”⁶⁹ *Stimmung* “assails us”; it “comes neither from ‘outside’ nor from ‘inside,’ but ... *has already disclosed, in every case, Being-in-the-world as a whole.*”⁷⁰ Rickert’s notion of an “ambient rhetoric” thus seeks to account for this primordial “mood” by rejecting rhetoric’s traditional emphasis on speaker intention in favor of an “originary, worldly rhetoricity” that is constituted by a “worldly affectability prior to symbolicity” existing outside of purely human control.⁷¹ Although he does not cite Morton in *Ambient Rhetoric* (2013), Rickert echoes Morton’s characterization of ambience as an embodied materiality that precedes symbolic language.

Gumbrecht’s book *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* does not reference “ambience” explicitly, but his work is often cited in discussions of ambience,⁷² and the words “atmosphere,” “mood,” and “*Stimmung*” are often used interchangeably with “ambient” in the theories I have presented. Furthermore, Gumbrecht’s description of “reading [literature] for *Stimmung*” is quite resonant with Rickert’s ambient rhetoric: he advocates for “paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality” in order to “[discover] sources of energy in artifacts and giv[e] oneself over to them affectively and

⁶⁹ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 14.

⁷⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York ; Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962), 175-6 (136-7).

⁷¹ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 8-9, 30.

⁷² See Roquet, *Ambient Media*, 6; Mapes-Frances, “Reading Machines,” 11; Ulrik Ekman, “Introduction,” in *Throughout* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 28.

bodily.”⁷³

Although I value the importance of such theories in attending to ‘weaker’ embodied and material experiences as playing a constitutive role in conscious linguistic interpretation, my issue with these notions of ambient signification is their contradictory characterization of material sensory experience or affect as “primordial,” “immediate,” “real,” “present,” and “whole,” in contrast to the symbolic language that imposes boundaries onto this ontologically prior unity.

For example, although Gumbrecht claims that in any experience of *Stimmung* “sense and meaning are secondary,” his “reading for *Stimmung*” appears functionally impossible without recourse to words’ meaning.⁷⁴ Gumbrecht’s argument, for example, that in Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 38” the “physical closeness of the beloved becomes one with the presence of the lover and, thus, the breath and voice of the poems themselves,” hinges on the collapsing of Shakespeare’s line “While thou dost breathe, that pour’st into my verse” with the poem’s literal “physical presence” for the reader.⁷⁵ The “mood” of the sonnet, which is supposedly impossible to locate in the meaning of the words themselves, is thus paradoxically rendered precisely through an extremely literal analysis whereby the experience of the reader is characterized as a direct manifestation of a situation *represented* in the text. This contradicts Gumbrecht’s assertion that atmospheres and moods operate as “extra-linguistic realities” that, unlike the “paradigm of representation ... *belong to the substance and reality of the world.*”⁷⁶

This recourse to the totality of pure presence has political implications. Morton, for example, states that ambience can be “a gate into another dimension ... [into] the *nowness* that is

⁷³ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 5, 18.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 20.

far more radically ‘here’ than any concept of ‘here,’ such as nation, race, gender,” for it “exists *beyond any notion of conceptuality*.”⁷⁷ Although well-meaning, this statement points toward the internal political tensions of ambience. I would question, for example, Morton’s valorization in this text of a transcendence “beyond” the production of marked identities, which poses the danger of simply flattening the actual complexity with which such discursive operations interact with material experience. In his analysis of ambience as an ecopolitical mode of writing, Therieau makes a similar critique, arguing that the supposed ability to “view climate catastrophe as something ‘as ignorable as it is interesting’” (here quoting Eno) is inherently bound up with class relations.⁷⁸

In a slightly different vein from Gumbrecht and Morton, Rickert argues extensively for a co-constitution of language and materiality, stating that the “originary weddedness to the world” ambience evokes is also an “originary rhetoricity.”⁷⁹ What phenomena the term “rhetoricity” is actually able to account for, though, remains vague throughout the book. Rickert argues, via Heidegger, that “meaning already permeates the world around us, even if it is not yet linguistic meaning”; “rhetoric” is thus “caught up in the play of [both] language and materiality.”⁸⁰ However, while he writes, on the one hand, that ambience reveals “*rhetoricity itself* as worldly affectability prior to symbolicity,” he later states that rhetoric “*emerges from our being-in-the-world ... receiv[ing] its bearings from an attunement to all aspects of worldly existence*.”⁸¹ Rickert thus refrains from making concrete *how*, exactly, “symbolic” language and this other

⁷⁷ Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics?”, 52 (my emphasis).

⁷⁸ Mitch Therieau, “The Ambient Mode,” *Post45* (forthcoming), 35, quoting Eno, liner notes to *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*.

⁷⁹ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, xviii.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 171, 161.

⁸¹ Ibid., 30, 189-90 (my emphasis).

form of ambiguous, affective “meaning” are related, instead vacillating between the notion of “rhetoric” *as itself* pure primordial affect and as the semi-symbolic *manipulation* of this affect as a secondary process.

Another example of this critical ambivalence is the influence Rickert takes from bodies of scholarship such as object-oriented ontology (hereafter OOO), which seeks to de-emphasize anthropomorphic critical attention to discursivity by attending to the “ontology of *things themselves*” prior to their relation with other objects.⁸² However, OOO’s invocation of the pre-relational “thing in itself” (a notion about which Rickert himself appears ambivalent⁸³) contradicts the notion of rhetoricity as an “originary” encounter with the world: after all, lending the materiality of objects an essential wholeness *primary to* their relational constitution necessarily opposes signification, which is an inherently relational process.

I hope I have been able to show that these eco-ethical theories of ambient language reveal the inherent paradox in the valorization of a material presence somehow divorced from the work of language. For, the invocation of access to an “extra-linguistic ... *reality of the world*,” a mystical, pre-conceptual “nowness,” or an “originary weddedness to the world” implies that a “re-wedding” to this world might somehow be possible by escaping symbolic language—a move that ultimately only serves to reinforce the binary opposition between language and materiality, or “nature” and “culture,” that ambience would ostensibly seek to resolve.

⁸² Ibid., 23, quoting Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, 1.

⁸³ Although Rickert seems to be arguing for a co-relation between human and nonhuman meaning-making, he draws from Harman’s discussion of the “withdrawal” of the object, stating that “objects wend their way in the world through their own capacities, too, not just through those we intend for them or attribute to them” (204); later on, he endorses Jane Bennett’s characterization of a blackout in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) with the phrase “Thus spoke the grid,” thus reifying the characterization of nonhuman “agency” in human terms (213). This is not a problem with Rickert specifically, but a contradiction in OOO as such; however, it serves as an example of Rickert’s vagueness on the question of the ontological priority of things, or materiality more broadly, to their (semiotic) relations.

In an essay entitled “Against Ambience,” sound studies scholar Seth Kim-Cohen launches one of the most extensive existent critiques of ambience, criticizing it as “an artistic mode of passivity” and characterizing its praise of formlessness as an apolitical relation with the world that is “content to let other events and entities wash over it, unperturbed.”⁸⁴ Although “differentiation is always a dangerous option,” he argues, it is a “necessary risk” in order for critical and ethical choices to come into being.⁸⁵ The alternative Kim-Cohen offers to ambience’s passivity is an emphasis on “transparency” in artistic method—he praises, for example, work that “allow[s] the process to elaborate itself in real-time transparency” instead of camouflaging the process with “postproduction manipulations,” as Eno’s music apparently does.⁸⁶ While I agree with the general sentiment of Kim-Cohen’s critiques of ambience, this celebration of transparency goes too far in the opposite direction; his fixation on “process” relies on the logic of a disproportionate authority of the intention of the author in the textual encounter, supposing that a critical spectator could be produced if only the work’s mode of production could be rendered entirely ‘legible.’⁸⁷

It is also worth noting that scholars of ambience such as Rickert and Morton are themselves not unaware of the precarity of “ambience” as a concept. At one point in his book, Rickert notes the “dangers” for rhetorical interaction produced by “ambient intelligence,” a type of physical environmental computing related to ubiquitous computing, which threatens to “disperse” all agency through a “through a dynamic material-informatic ecology” of insidious control.⁸⁸ Although appearing to endorse certain forms of ambient writing in “Why Ambient

⁸⁴ Kim-Cohen, “Against Ambience,” 32.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 64, 65.

⁸⁷ For a salient critique of Kim-Cohen’s argument, see also Mapes-Frances, “Reading Machines,” 8-9.

⁸⁸ Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 32.

Poetics?”—only noting briefly that ambience can be weaponized as a “soothing panacea for capitalist and technocratic alienation”—in *Ecology Without Nature* (published five years later), Morton changes tack to position himself decidedly *against* ambience, criticizing its reinforcement of a logic of primordial “nature.” He goes on to make the claim that “ambient poetics will *never* actually dissolve the difference between inside and outside,”⁸⁹ a critical move that has gone largely unacknowledged by other scholars of ambience who have made use of the concept.⁹⁰ Interestingly, in a move opposite from Rickert (although perhaps more in line with the philosophy of OOO), Morton would go on to endorse OOO as a solution *against* the neoliberal dangers of ambience, arguing in a 2012 article that “there is no ether or medium or ‘middle object’ in which other objects float,” sometimes called “ambience”⁹¹—instead, “[a] poem directly intervenes in reality in a causal way” in the same way that, following OOO, objects have agency prior to any relationality.⁹²

Morton’s critiques of ambience, some of which I will reference in my conclusion, are apt, and my approach to ambience will echo in some ways the (albeit quite ambivalently) Derridean notion of language he outlines in *Ecology Without Nature*.⁹³ However, instead of turning to a pre-relational realism, I would like to take seriously the question of ambient textuality without the

⁸⁹ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 52. He then reads the techniques of ambient media through Derrida’s concept of the *re-mark*, which, he claims, “either undoes the distinction altogether, in which case there is nothing to perceive,” or allows one to perceive *only* “a boundary” (52). Thus, using Derrida to argue for the inescapability of the boundary, Morton argues—supposedly against Jean-François Lyotard’s *nuance*, or “some quality of color or sound that exists ‘in between’ inside and outside”—“I ... do not think that ambience will save us from anything” (52).

⁹⁰ Most scholars who draw on Morton’s “ambient poetics” explicitly, including Travis Matteson, Karen Pinkus, Paul Roquet, Jonathan Dovey and Matt Hayler, and even Seth Kim-Cohen, do not address the fact that *Ecology Without Nature* is largely a negative critique of ambient poetics.

⁹¹ Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012), 209.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 206, 207.

⁹³ I do not have space for an extended reading of *Ecology Without Nature* in this thesis, not least because Morton’s argument as to the relationship between language and the subject/object is often quite vague; for instance, the last paragraph of the book begins obliquely, “Instead of positing a nondualistic pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, we could hang out in what feels like dualism. This hanging out would be a more nondual approach” (205).

contradictory reliance upon phenomenological experience as a unity ontologically prior to language—which, as I hope I have shown, is the general standpoint of existing theories of ambience—or a recourse to theories such as OOO, which erase relationality altogether. My “reading for ambience,” rather, seeks not to demarcate a strict boundary between semiotic structure and material “reality,” but to investigate their fundamental co-implication. I will do so through a close examination of the writing of Tan Lin, whose notion of ambience—both in form and in content—expands the term beyond the theories I have outlined thus far.

Lin’s 2010 book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* includes primarily prose poems—some of which read more like essays—but also many images, fragments of code, metadata, and entire sections consisting of scanned pages from other books. The poems are filled with philosophical reflections and often sound like aesthetic treatises, making repeated statements about the characteristics of the “ideal,” “beautiful,” or “powerful” book, poem, or painting.⁹⁴ One of the first pages of the book reads:

5:27 35°

What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of literature that didn’t have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading.⁹⁵

This opening prose poem, which I discussed briefly in my introduction, exhibits some of the primary formal techniques that persist throughout *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and, to a certain extent, Lin’s style in general: irony, via provocative and often self-contradictory meta-

⁹⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 82 (“ideal”), 26, 40, 48, 66, 80... (“beautiful”), 70 (“powerful”).

⁹⁵ Ibid., 16.

statements about the ‘purpose’ of art and the inclusion of typos or intentional misspellings (“Dew-champ”); the use of unexplained metadata and other fragmentary text (“5:27 35”); the subversion of traditional genre- or medium-specific distinctions, while still making use of genre- and medium-specific markers as central rhetorical and poetic objects; and the equation of unlike terms with each other (“Poetry = wallpaper”) and affirmation of the coexistence of inverted or contradicting terms (“forms of non-reading and...non-forms of reading”).

The poem’s aesthetic edicts take as a foundation what Rosalind Krauss has called the “post-medium condition,” in which art “is not defined in relation to a given medium”—which she renames the “technical support”—but “in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium ... might be used.”⁹⁶ The term resonates in an age wherein digital media allow for the instantaneous conversion and widespread dissemination of any given file in a wide variety of formats. Lin’s work is firmly situated in the post-medium paradigm; some of the poems in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, including the one quoted, were first published as a voiceover to a 2002 video artwork entitled “Eleven Minute Painting” (literally “text as ambient soundtrack”), and the book was published in various different editions as a free PDF online.

The comparison of books to placemats and the playful reference to Marcel Duchamp also signals Lin’s interest in postmodern techniques such as the commercialized fragmentation and pastiche of modern aesthetic forms. Fredric Jameson famously defines postmodernism as a “new kind of flatness or depthlessness” in culture, a function of multinational capitalism and the resulting full incorporation of aesthetic and cultural production “into commodity production

⁹⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979), 42; *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 53.

generally.”⁹⁷ Culture is thus so dominated by consumer capital and the visual image that “aesthetic experience is now everywhere and saturates social and daily life in general,” which “has rendered the very notion of an individual art work problematic.”⁹⁸ In Lin’s terms, the postmodern condition renders all objects interchangeable as works of art or non-art, and thus explodes the categories of genre and traditional artistic form: text can just as easily be “ambient soundtrack,” and poetry can just as easily be “wallpaper.”

Seven Controlled Vocabularies also echoes Eno’s incorporation and subversion of commercial techniques of Muzak in his genre of ambient music, as well as rhetoric that calls to mind Roquet’s mood-regulating novel. The book makes repeated mention of the fact that books should “aspire ... to the condition of relaxation and yoga,” and compares literature to “a thermostat”: it “should regulate the room’s energies,” which “allows the piece to constantly erase itself.”⁹⁹ Lin’s interest is thus in investigating the possibility that a novel or a poem might function in the same way as background music: subtly attuning the reader to the spatial “idiosyncrasies,” to quote Eno, of a given situation by becoming inseparable from the surrounding environment.

If a book is meant to play in the background like a piece of ambient music, however, how do we understand the act of reading? Certainly not, one would imagine, as the linear interpretation of singular words producing a chronological narrative with a beginning and an end. For, if “poetry” can be “wallpaper” and vice versa (as suggested by the equals sign between the two terms in the first poem), then our notion of “text” must be expanded to something like ‘the

⁹⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 60, 55.

⁹⁸ Fredric Jameson, “Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity,” in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Post-Modern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 100.

⁹⁹ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 22.

world in general.’ Starting from a postmodern rejection of any static definition of the aesthetic form as such, Lin’s “reading,” in the traditional sense of the conscious linking of linguistic signifiers to direct external referents, cannot be separated from “non-reading.” The mechanism of Lin’s “ambient textuality” thus starts to take shape: in my analysis, “reading” functions as a term which encompasses also non-attentive (e.g. “looking”) and even non-visual (e.g. “soundtrack”) encounters, just as the concept of the “text” escapes the bounds of the discrete book or singular literary object. “Reading” is thus “ambient” in its privileging of modes of signification that are not consciously interpreted and its rejection of the boundaries between “text” and “world,” “figure” and “ground,” or “nature” and “culture.”

To illustrate a characteristic example of how such an ambient reading might function, I will turn to another poem in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, entitled “PRADA”:

Like our various selves, literature should function as a pattern with a label on it, like the lines in a parking lot at the local A&P or the indistinguishable, partially imagined street names found in private, gated communities throughout North America: Elm Place, Elm Tree Lane, Ellingham, Elsingham, Ellen Tree Road, Elmwood Ave., Elm Circle Rd., etc. The most beautiful books are the most invisible ones, just as a pink chemise with embroidered flowers by Marc Jacobs would be almost meaningless without a label and just as a Prada shoe should carry a red stripe down its sole or a bag by Louis Vuitton should have its initials prominently scrambled all over its surface *in order to* be read. And by read I mean not read in any meaningful way. After all, who has really read a bag by Louis Vuitton or a sweater with a deliberately unraveled collar by Martin Margiela although I have read these things for many hours of the afternoon?¹⁰⁰

In this poem, traditional conventions of reading and textuality are undermined through the inversion of literary texts and other forms of signification. We “read” a Marc Jacobs chemise or a Prada shoe or a Louis Vuitton bag because we recognize them as signs: through experience,

¹⁰⁰ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* 66.

a logo or signature design is “learned” until it is immediately recognizable. A logo could ‘communicate’ many things—wealth, status, beauty, etc. Here, “reading” is defined by a recognition of the way in which a sign can change one’s perception of the object it is attached to: “a pink chemise ... by Marc Jacobs would be almost meaningless without a label.” “Reading” via the object of a logo thus brings to the fore the way in which signs have the potential to structure our experience. Lines on concrete could be read as a “logo” of the parking lot, and street names could be read as interchangeable logos of “private, gated communities throughout North America.”

One might here recall Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis of fashion and advertisements; in “Rhetoric of the Image,” for example, he reads an advertisement for the pasta brand Panzani by “skim[ming] off” the different messages it contains.”¹⁰¹ However, whereas Barthes reconstructs links between specific aspects of the image (e.g. “the tricoloured hues (yellow, green, red)”) and distinct cultural or ideological referents (e.g. “*Italianicity*”), Lin’s “logos” destabilize the stable relationship between signifier and signified through an *ambient* mechanism of reading.¹⁰²

This “ambience,” I argue, lies in the foregrounding of the structure of language—or, rather, more broadly, signification—itself. Specifically, I wish to show that the structural mechanism by which ambient reading functions is *metaphor*, or, more broadly, signification as a network of *substitutions* and *differences*. In contrast to Barthes’ invocation of a discrete “linguistic message” hiding in every image, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* operates by a logic of extreme contingency, wherein every concept, word, or sign has the potential to stand in for

¹⁰¹ Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 33.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 34.

another—and is continually constituted and re-constituted by this substitution. Literature “functions as” a pattern with a label. It can also be “looked at, like placemats.”¹⁰³ In “PRADA,” “Ellingham” can be substituted for “Ellen Tree Road” because, viewed as a *logo*, they can be read as signifying the ‘same thing.’ A sign, however, must also not always be read the same way: at the end of the poem, the speaker questions the notion that anyone would “really read a bag by Louis Vuitton”—I take the phrase “really read” as a reference to reading “in a meaningful way” in the previous sentence, i.e., not like a logo—before admitting that they “have read these things for many hours of the afternoon.” A bag by Louis Vuitton *could* be read from left to right like a page from a novel, “LVLVLVLVLV.” And a novel could be read as simply “a pattern with a label on it.”

These substitutions are thus not static, but dynamic and iterative. An equivalence is a kind of substitution: “Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object.”¹⁰⁴ A few pages later, though, a slightly different formulation: “poetry (like a beautiful painting) ought to be replaced by the walls that surround it and doors that lead into empty rooms, kitchens and hypnosis.”¹⁰⁵ Many pages later: “Writing a novel is a variant of writing a poem.”¹⁰⁶ A metaphorical relation here does not exist as a defined entity or property that links two static signifiers, but remains in constant play. Furthermore, it is not only the pure ‘content’ of the metaphor that shifts, but the *form*, or *formulation*, of that metaphor. “Poetry = wallpaper” is not simply repeated as “Poetry = walls”; instead, the direct equation is expanded into a wider diagrammatic relation within architectural space.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 132.

This same logic is visible in *The Patio and the Index*, a “novel” published as an open-access web reader on the website of the publication *Triple Canopy* in 2011. Following his father’s death, the protagonist reflects on the notions of childhood, family, and memory via a nonlinear narrative loosely structured around his father’s construction projects in and around the general ecosystem of their family home, including the ferns in the backyard:

They, along with the moss that we also liked to transplant, reminded my father and me of a blanket made by nature and came to stand in my mind for the wall-to-wall carpeting in our house, and so, in a sense, the woods for me were always carpeted just as our house was, and the life of the woods around our house was in a continual cycle of self-domestication and perpetual greening, which I associated with reading and families. Reading repaired something like nature or our house, and nature, like our family memories, was carpeted like a piece of handiwork.¹⁰⁷

Here, a mass of ferns can be ‘read’ as “a blanket made by nature,” and thus can also substitute for the carpet inside a house; this carpet can also function as an attribute of both “nature” and “our family memories.” This is an experience of signification as metaphor, “metaphor” here being the ability of one sign to “translate” into, “substitute” or “stand in for,” another. Moreover, just as ferns appear to self-reproduce ‘automatically’ via a network of spores, the mechanism of “reading” operates even outside of the conscious effort of the reader: an endless process of translation and re-translation akin to the “continual cycle of self-domestication and greening” of the woods. Metaphor here is not simply a poetic device, but a centrally *productive* force in the emergence of things and their relation to the world. This is why “reading” remains a central concept throughout Lin’s body of work. Figures in his writing, from the notion of aesthetic genre to the construction of “family” or “childhood,” are constantly being re-

¹⁰⁷ Lin, *The Patio and the Index*.

constituted, in an endless cycle of repetition and difference, depending upon the semiotic system they are being read through at any given moment—a system that is not entirely under the control of the reader but environmentally produced. And, this endless network of substitutions constitutes one’s experience of the world: in Lin’s work, thus, there is literally “*nothing outside of the text*.”¹⁰⁸

I employ Jacques Derrida’s famous statement here to signal the way in which signification through metaphor in Lin’s work can be articulated through Derrida’s conception of language, in which a signified or ‘referent’ is never present in and of itself, but instead “inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences.”¹⁰⁹ It is what Derrida calls a “supplementary” process; for, although each new metaphorical iteration of a sign “adds itself ... [as] a surplus” to the system, it is not a surplus of a positive presence—it adds itself in order to “*replace*” another sign. Signification is thus predicated upon a certain continual absence, a notion I will return to and build upon throughout the thesis.

The experience of the world produced by Lin’s “reading” is that of a continual “supplement as ... supplement of supplement, sign of sign, *taking the place of* a speech already significant.”¹¹⁰ As I will continue to argue in the following chapters, in Lin’s work, one cannot trace any given concepts or terms back to an original, ‘true’ meaning or essence; instead, they circulate in an endless process of play, wherein the reading ‘subject’ is both player and played. Lin’s reading is thus also a “writing,” operating similarly to Derrida’s conception of language as

¹⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 172: “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*.”

¹⁰⁹ Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 11.

¹¹⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 306.

a generalized writing: the two are inextricably linked. As such, I will go on to use “reading,” “writing,” and “textuality” relatively interchangeably in the following chapters.

After this detour through a brief introduction to the two texts I analyze in this thesis, I return to the question: where does Tan Lin’s “ambient textuality” fit in among the initial ambiances I have defined?

Practically, considering the aesthetic parameters of Lin’s work with regard to the postmodern, we might here recall Krauss, who has also analyzed the dissolution between “figure” and “ground” in her writing on postmodern sculpture.¹¹¹ Following her language, in Lin’s work, “ambience” might be read as a post-“medium” of which the reciprocal substitutability of metaphor is the “logical operation.”¹¹² Lin describes this effort as “relaxing certain parameters” of genre categorization using practices such as “sampling” and “communal production”—what Krauss might call a “layering of conventions.”¹¹³

On the one hand, Lin’s description of a not-quite-conscious reading, which also can be looking, or perhaps even listening (“ambient soundtrack”), an experience of being both surrounded by and a participant in the nonlinear play of signification, is reminiscent of the low-grade “perceptual events” described by Morton and others. It also certainly works against the metaphysical subordination of object to subject, of ground to figure. However, I argue that Lin’s “ambient reading” differs significantly from the “ambient aesthetics,” “ambient poetics,” “ambient rhetoric,” and other ambiances defined above in that it does not center sensory experience as a pre-conscious given, a thing existing in the ‘real’ primary to signification and

¹¹¹ See Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.”

¹¹² Ibid., 42.

¹¹³ Lin, “Tan Lin | FCA Grant Recipient.”

interpretation. Instead, in Lin's ambience, materiality is invoked as part of the weave of the discursive realm itself, in which semiotic structure—both its continual productivity and its continual exclusions, though a rejection of final “arrival” of meaning—becomes central to the problematic of relational being, not a force to be rejected in favor of the return to a vague primordial unity. This approach to the notion of ambience thus resists the idea of the “open, formless field” described by Schmidt—a notion contradicted by Schmidt himself; for, how could an experience be “formless” while also “‘plac[ing]’ the subject *in the center* of a given situation,” a formulation which inherently implies some kind of spatiotemporal boundary?¹¹⁴

By shifting ambience away from a notion of “immediate [perceptual] contact with a situation in its entirety,”¹¹⁵ I don't mean to suggest that it is impossible to have an experience that feels like “formlessness” or “unity,” that there are not affective and sensory phenomena that seem to escape linguistic capture, or that all objects and beings in the world do not share a kind of kinship by virtue of existing, together. However, I wish to show that rather than being fundamentally opposed to the work of the symbolic, these phenomena are inextricable from it. I resist the reliance on the notion of pre-significatory wholeness as the most productive lens through which to encounter affectivity and perception. Instead, I argue that confronting the role discursivity plays in the production of such experiences actually allows for a more flexible and critical engagement with the conditions of our time. By taking as its object the way in which systems of signification structure material experience, an “ambient textuality” exposes also the *contingency* of meaning, of experience itself, opening up the potential for productive structural

¹¹⁴ Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” 176.

¹¹⁵ Thibaud, “From situated perception to urban ambiances,” 3.

change—what Haraway refers to as textuality’s potential for not only “*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries,” but also “*responsibility* in their construction.”¹¹⁶

I thus share the perspective well phrased by Derrida: “The opposition of intuition, the concept, and consciousness at this point no longer has any pertinence. These three values belong to the order and to the movement of meaning. Like metaphor.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” 7.

¹¹⁷ Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, 270.

2. AUTOMATIC SUBSTITUTION

The back cover of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* looks more like a front cover, and vice versa. The front cover contains a block of Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data for the book, whereas the back cover contains the title and author in large text, as well as two subtitles: “[AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]” and “A BOOK OF META DATA [STANDARDS] DOWNLOADED, RECIPES, WITH PHOTOGRAPHS FROM A FLEA MARKET.”

On the bottom left corner, above the barcode, is the text “FOREWORD / LAURA RIDING JACKSON.” Upon flipping through the first few pages of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, though, a reader may notice that there is no section marked “Foreword” at the beginning of the book. In fact, the “foreword” by Laura Riding Jackson referenced on the back cover (and on two of the three inside front cover pages) is actually the foreword to Riding Jackson’s own book *Rational Meaning* (1997), reproduced as grayscale scans on pages 155-159 of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*.

This introduction to *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* via its covers is meant to illustrate what I believe to be a fundamental property of the work: that every page, every word, every sign—including the book’s most basic, ostensibly non-decorative and ‘non-literary’ attributes—functions, or can be *read*, in potentially infinite ways. Nothing is quite as it seems—or, alternatively, everything is exactly as it seems: after all, the title page designation “FOREWORD / LAURA RIDING JACKSON” contains no lie.

My calling attention to the foreword-that-comes-in-the-middle also introduces the book's subversion of any explicit spatiotemporal hierarchy of information. A foreword is an example of a paratext, defined by Gérard Genette as “verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations” that “surround” and “extend” a text “precisely in order to *present* it”—what “enables a text to become a book.”¹¹⁸ In *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, though, the authority of paratext as a presentation device is called into question: the “Acknowledgments” on page 9 are directly copied from *Reification: or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (2002) by Timothy Bewes, who is not credited (although included in a ‘thanks to’ list on page 166). Lin’s ‘real’ Acknowledgments section—‘real’ in that it names Lin’s actual editors, friends, and family members, and does not seem to be copied from another work—comes on page 161.

In other words, paratext in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* is not ‘just’ a functional device that “surrounds” some discrete poetic ‘content’: on the contrary, poetry has always already begun. With such a textual system put in place, Lin lends each page, word, and sign in the book equal semiotic ‘weight’: the back cover is no more or less relevant as a poetic object than one of the book’s many multi-strophe prose poems, or the front cover, or the Acknowledgments.

This logic can also be inverted, however. If the textual organization of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* promotes the equal distribution of reading attention, then a multi-strophe prose poem—for example, page 40 of the book, entitled “04100261 GREEN”—is suitable to be skimmed, just as we might be accustomed to letting our eyes gloss over a book’s back cover, foreword, or Acknowledgments page rather than read them word for word. Attention can be traded for non-attention. The production of a non-attentive reading is aided by the fact that many

¹¹⁸ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds, Culture, Interpretation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

of the book's pages contain little to no text at all, only a pixelated scan of an envelope,¹¹⁹ or the words "PLATE 2,"¹²⁰ or the words "PLATE 2 / LECTURE (Panel 77/60) / FLIRT (#3522 RED)." ¹²¹ In this reciprocal inversion of reading-*qua*-skimming, all text becomes paratext.

The Greek prefix *para-* or *par-* means "beside; adjacent to," "distinct from, but analogous to," "beyond," or "subsidiary; assisting." Derrida analyzes a similar object to Genette's paratext in *The Truth in Painting*, where he writes extensively on the concept of the *parergon* of a work of art: that which is "neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work, neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below," such as "the frame, the title, the legend" of a painting.¹²² Just like paratext, the *parergon* is a *supplement to* the work, but the work itself is impossible without the supplement; in fact, the *parergon* "gives rise to the work."¹²³ Conceived of spatially, it thus destabilizes the task of locating "the limit between inside and outside."¹²⁴

Morton invokes Derrida's *parergon* in his illustration of ambient poetics' attention to materiality, writing that ambience "can refer to the margins of a page, the silence before and after music, the frame and walls around a picture, the decorative spaces of a building (*parergon*)."¹²⁵ *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* makes abundant use of margins and blank spaces; the first section of poems, for example, entitled "A Field Guide to American Painting: ES/13 plates," contains no images. Instead, every odd page (17-41) contains only a numbered label at the top left ("PLATE 1," "PLATE 2" ... "PLATE 13") and a page number at the bottom right. To enter the reading system of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* is thus to enter a proliferation of paratext and *parerga*,

¹¹⁹ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 71.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 19

¹²¹ Ibid., 46.

¹²² Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 9.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹²⁵ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 16.

woven into the text such that separating the practical from the poetic, the supplementary from the original, would require making a disingenuous and arbitrary distinction.

Seven Controlled Vocabularies operates by defamiliarizing forms of language and interpretation we are used to recognizing and performing automatically: this is, arguably, the traditionally accepted purpose of “poetry” in general. But—inversely—this same mechanism of de-hierarchization of the reading process also allows an ‘automation’ of the apprehension of even supposedly ‘new’ or ‘unfamiliar’ signs. In this chapter, I track this de-hierarchization through the metaphor of “information”—invoked throughout the book as the underlying mechanism of reading—in order to show how the book’s comparison of ambient reading practices to the function of networked and digital communication technologies reveals the technicity of reading as such.

Exactly this latter case—a mechanized, uniformly structured intake of information applied indiscriminately to any given object—is what the poems in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* tell the reader the ideal artwork should produce: “reading is a very weak pattern of information gathering and typos.”¹²⁶ Or: “The ideal novel would not be necessary to read at all. It would have no inside or outside. All words would flow outwards like soft data.”¹²⁷ Or: “Literature like everything else [monarchism, class distinctions, mercantilism, free markets] should just be a form of packaging, which is a method for extracting non-variable information at the moment before it is released.”¹²⁸ The words “information” and “data” appear everywhere in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*. Put simply, the book can be read as a test of pushing the concept

¹²⁶ Ibid., 105.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 102.

of “information processing” to its extreme, such that it becomes a fundamental state of being.

Information theory, as formulated by mathematician Claude Shannon in 1948, models all communication as a mathematical relation of a sender, a message, and a receiver. A message is made up of “signal” and “noise,” and no communication is possible without the disruptive intrusion of noise—unintended, extra information, such as distortion or feedback—into the signal, the meaningful information to be communicated.¹²⁹ Contemporaneously, Norbert Wiener employed the logic of information as the basis for cybernetics, a general theory of systems that could apply to biological organisms as well as machines. Wiener writes in *The Human Use of Human Beings* (first published in 1950) that the “process of receiving and of using information is the process of our adjusting to the contingencies of the outer environment, and of our living effectively within that environment.”¹³⁰ Cybernetics is thus a way of modeling both living beings and automated communication machines as operating via a constant informational interplay between organization and entropy. Wiener’s model, argues N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, was thus a paradigm-shifting redefinition of “being” as grounded not upon essential biological characteristics, but upon the capability to compute information.¹³¹

Today, we live in the continuously accelerating aftermath of Shannon’s and Wiener’s discoveries. Digital media translate analog, or continuously variable, signals into discrete units of

¹²⁹ Claude Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” *Bell System Technical Journal*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1948). Shannon’s goal was to be able to mathematically reduce noise in mechanical communication systems to more effectively isolate the signal. His originally intended application for information theory was to the field of telecommunications engineering, for example to reduce the amount of static transmitted along with the voice of the speaker in telephone communication.

¹³⁰ Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (London: Free Association, 1989), 17-18.

¹³¹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 2.

numerical data—binary code—to be used for a variety of further processes of computation by the countless new media technologies that structure our lives. File conversion, compression, and widespread dissemination can be performed instantaneously with a single click. The mechanism of hypertext on the internet—defined by Hayles as writing that has “multiple reading paths, chunked text, and some kind of linking mechanism to connect the chunks”—has led linear coherence in digital texts to be largely discarded in favor of the endless, circulating de- and re-contextualization of fragments by individual users and distributors.¹³² What Hayles identifies as increasingly primary, *digital* reading practices such as “skimming,” “scanning,” “hyperlinking,” and “juxtaposing” signal the reading subject’s increasing envelopment into an ambient textual environment or *atmosphere* rather than a linear, consciously interpretive engagement with discrete written objects.¹³³

Many media scholars have noted the prescience of poststructuralist philosophy in opening up a conception of critique and textuality suitable to networked, computational, and/or digital life. Hayles and Lev Manovich have both cited the resonance of Barthes’ essay “From Work to Text” with the effects of new media technologies. In his influential book *The Language of New Media*, Manovich compares each of Barthes’ seven “propositions” of “text” (as opposed to the previous hegemony of the “work”) to the characteristics of new media; for example, while the “work” is a material object, the “text” exists only “in the movement of a discourse,”¹³⁴ signaling a certain autonomy from what Hayles would call the “material substrate” that mirrors the new media object’s ability to be preserved across various media and formats. The “text” does

¹³² N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (The University of Chicago Press: 2012), 12.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³⁴ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in *Image, Music, Text*, 163; Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 163.

not distinguish between “writing” and “reading,” for it has no single “Author,” but acknowledges the inherent contingency and relational constitution of meaning by a mutable system of writer-readers. This emphasis on interactivity and mutability resonates with the “hypertextual, distributed, and dynamic” characteristics of new media writing. In a passage that resonates with Manovich’s analysis, Hayles points to Barthes’ statement that the “metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*.”¹³⁵

Derrida has similarly noted that his work “risked” the dismantling of the hegemony of the concept of traditional linear writing, the subordination of writing to speech and absence to presence, “well before computers.”¹³⁶ With the advent of computer, he argues, the methods of “graftings, insertions, cuttings, and pastings” he viewed as present in language from the outset have simply “become ordinary,” literally “projected toward the exterior.”¹³⁷

In *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, Lin brings to the foreground this hypertrophied citation, fragmentation, compression, and de-hierarchization of writing online. In addition to the book’s inclusion of many credited and uncredited citations from other texts (including, directly preceding Riding Jackson’s Foreword, a scanned reproduction of the Index section from Barthes’ *Image, Music, Text*¹³⁸), *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* was published in several different editions at several different stages of publication, most of which are still available for free PDF download online.

¹³⁵ Hayles, “Print is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” *Poetics Today* 25, no. 1 (2004), 68, quoting Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” 161.

¹³⁶ Derrida, *Paper Machine* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2005), 25.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 25, 27.

¹³⁸ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 151-3.

These include four editions of 七受控詞表和2004年訃告, or *7CV Chinese Edition*.

According to the website of Edit Publications, the event series during which they were produced by Lin and a large group of co-editors, these are four different translations of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*: “Edition 1, in traditional Chinese without images. Edition 2, with images. Edition 3, in simplified Chinese with images. Edition 4, reverse translation from simplified Chinese into English.” Each translation was done using Google Translate.¹³⁹ The official title of the doubly reverse Google translated *Edition 4* is: *Seven controlled vocabularies and delivering a speech in 2004 : hi cooking : [sound of poetry airport new theory films landscape painting]* (hereafter *7CV Chinese Edition 4*). The original English *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* and *7CV Chinese Edition 4* have the exact same layout, which makes a side-by-side reading all the more interesting. For instance, to take a passage we have already examined:

What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take?
Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ
wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of
literature that didn't have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most
exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading.¹⁴⁰

becomes:

What are the forms of non-read what is inside and non-form may be within the time go?
Poetry = wallpaper. Small objects within the = design. Cultural environment score? Dew
point champions who want to create a non-retinal art. This will be good to create works
of literature is not read, but you can look at, like mat. The most exasperating thing in the
poetry reading is always the voice of a poet reading.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ 七受控詞表和2004年訃告, or *7CV Chinese Edition*, “Network Publishing Tan Lin's 7CV | Edit Publications 2010, Danny Snelson,” accessed April 10, 2024, <https://aphasic-letters.com/edit/publications.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 16.

¹⁴¹ Lin, *7CV Chinese Edition 4*, 16.

Framing the Google translated versions as “editions” of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* removes the hierarchy of one being necessarily derivative from, or secondary to, the other. Of course, literally, it is impossible to have a translation without a preexisting work to be translated. But, rather than simply presenting itself as a distortion of the ‘original’ meaning of the poems in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, *7CV Chinese Edition 4* makes explicit that the concept of an original meaning is essentially irrelevant: what would ‘original’ even mean when discussing a work such as *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, already made up (to an undeterminable degree) of plagiarized text? As Derrida has remarked, the mechanism of translation—whereby a certain sign is selected as a substitute for a preexisting one—takes place not only ‘between’ languages, but is fundamental to the circulation of signs as such. It is impossible, he writes, to “deal with some ‘transfer’ of pure signifieds that the signifying instrument—or ‘vehicle’—would leave virgin and intact, from one language to another, or within one and the same language.”¹⁴² By enlisting Google Translate as a co-author, Lin expands the “vehicle” of signification beyond himself, illustrating the co-constitutive role of writing technology in any production of meaning.

Philosopher Bernard Stiegler, drawing on the work of Derrida and anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan’s history of the tool, argues that the “technical” and the “human” exist in a co-constituting complex: “[t]he technical inventing the human, the human inventing the technical.”¹⁴³ His use of “technical” refers to the Greek term *tekhnē* (from which “technology” derives), denoting, generally, the “craft” of giving form to matter that could apply not only to practical manufacturing but also to art, including poetry. Any conception of a human “interior”

¹⁴² Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 104 (footnote 31); translation modified by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, cxi.

¹⁴³ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 137.

being, he argues, cannot be thought of as chronologically, logically, or ontologically preexisting the prosthetic “exteriorization” of the human memory through technical tools.¹⁴⁴ This “exteriorization” follows the Derridean logic of the supplement: the technical is something added onto the human, but that also cannot be removed, for it allows for the human to come into being in the first place. Language, or the mechanism of signification, is for Stiegler a primary exemplar of the technical-object-as-necessary-supplement. Stiegler’s work thus clarifies not simply that technology and the ‘human’ are co-constitutive, but that *language itself is a technology*.

This position is echoed in Lin’s characterization of reading as information processing. Unlike in Stiegler, however, this ambient process seems to leave aside any distinction between the technical and the ‘human,’ between interior and exterior. Instead, focus shifts toward reading itself as an information processing *system* that appears to circulate independently of any discrete human—or technological—actor. The following quotation is a longer excerpt from the previously cited poem “LOGO”:

For this reason, the most powerful texts function like logos, a code wherein words and reading are synthesized into looking and staring, i.e., they become primitive and unmoving structures for the channeling of static information. As such they can be read as styleless or exemplars of a *fonctionnalité absent*. Such texts aspire to the furniture-like logos of multinational corporations, particularly gas and bank logos, which can typically be read bidirectionally or rotationally ... For this reason, they are boring to read, and resemble things like parking tickets, ticket stubs, and books like the Bible or *Dogs that Know When Their Owners are Coming Home*. A logo-like text is text and reading instructions as one, and thus transforms the activity of reading into a mechanical and premonitory activity wherein things that are read become endlessly static and recognizable. Reading is nothing more than a pattern, one that is not designed, where symmetry and asymmetry are indistinguishable. Such readers act like open-source codes.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Lin *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 70.

At the risk of oversimplification, I take this poem as paradigmatic of the mechanical formulation of “ambient reading” delineated iteratively and in various forms throughout the book. In “LOGO,” the non-conscious pattern recognition described in “PRADA” (analyzed in Chapter 1) is taken to its automated extreme. Importantly, Hayles notes, in both Shannon’s and Wiener’s formulations, information must be “calculated as the same value regardless of the contexts in which it [is] embedded.”¹⁴⁶ Within a theory of communication, this means that in order to be subject to computation, information must necessarily be treated as an abstract quantity independently from meaning, as well as from the materiality of its distribution mechanisms. Similarly, in “LOGO,” when “reading,” or “looking and staring” at, a logo, or a Bible, or neon signs, visual information appears to divorce itself from signification and interpretation—“symmetry and asymmetry are indistinguishable.” Expanding this logic to the formal fragmentation and nonlinear structure of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, every sign—from the LCSH on the front cover to the monotone prose of “LOGO”—becomes a discrete, quantitatively equivalent unit. The term “open-source code” refers to software that is shared publicly, able to be copied and/or directly altered by any user; an “open-source reading code” thus implies a certain collectivity, mutability, and interminability. Notably, the term appears here to refer to both “readers” and ‘read’ things, such as logos or parking tickets, thus illustrating the process of reading as a self-propelling *system* or *program* rather than belonging to any individual reader or text.

The basis of Wiener’s argument for the legitimacy of cybernetics rests on the potential for *analogy*, meaning the “analogous” relationship between the “structure of the machine or of the

¹⁴⁶ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 53-54.

organism” and “the performance that may be expected from it” as well as between two systems that function in the same way, in this case the living organism and the machine.¹⁴⁷ Analogy, just like metaphor, is an arrangement in which objects are *constituted in relation* to each other on the basis of a shared pattern of functioning. Hayles relates data to analogy in the following passage:

As data move across various kinds of interfaces, analogical relationships are the links that allow pattern to be preserved from one modality to another. Analogy is thus constituted as a universal exchange system that allows data to move across boundaries. It is the *lingua franca* of a world (re)constructed through relation rather than grasped in essence.¹⁴⁸

Much of the rhetoric in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* constitutes signification as just this—a universal exchange system with no regard for boundaries. As one poem formulates it: “Nothing is not substitutable with something else.”¹⁴⁹ Just as new media technologies operate on the assumption that they can assimilate any input into a stream of discrete, interchangeable numerical units, the structure of language as relation in the world here appears to eschew its material existence.

In some places in *7CV Chinese Edition 4*, relationships between words are changed marginally from the original, causing a shift in tone: page 148 in the original is titled “DEDICATION TO A WIFE,” while *7CV Chinese Edition 4* reads “Devoted to his wife.” On the following page, the original text undergoes a more succinct transformation: “FOUCAULT EPIGRAPH / There are no machines of freedom, by definition” becomes “Foucault inscription / No machine free, by definition.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 26, 57.

¹⁴⁸ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 98.

¹⁴⁹ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 108.

¹⁵⁰ Lin, *Ibid.*, 149; and *7CV Chinese Edition 4*, 149.

Lin's use of this quote by Foucault—from a 1982 interview with Paul Rabinow in *Skyline*¹⁵¹—clearly exposes the critical side of his project, including the Google translated versions. Technology, of course, is inseparable from the mode of its production, which, in the case of Google, is that of a massive corporation with the primary incentive of profit. It is also worth noting that since 2010, when *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* was published, Google Translate has improved exponentially, switching in 2016 from simple statistical machine translation, which uses predictive algorithms to choose the best word and word arrangement for a given sentence, to Google Neural Machine Translation (GNMT), a deep learning system trained to translate whole sentences at a time.¹⁵² Entering the above passage from page 16 of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* into Google Translate English > Chinese (Simplified) and then back again today produces a result that is almost exactly the same as the original text. The increasing ubiquity of networked computational technologies and dissolution of the goalposts that distinguish a notion of “human” or “organic” from “technological” is also an increase in the reach of corporate power and control. A later poem in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* invokes the paradoxical homogenizing effect of new media's increased algorithmic tailoring to the individual user:

All choices are freely unintentional and freely made. Mass individualization is the new standard. Muteness rules ... Only the freedom born of boredom [not having any real ideas] is worth having. Only the freedom born of boredom [not having any real desires] is

¹⁵¹ Michel Foucault and Paul Rabinow, “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 247: “Men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition.”

¹⁵² Quoc V. Le and Mike Schuster, “A Neural Network for Machine Translation, at Production Scale,” Google Research (2016), accessed April 11, 2024, <http://research.google/blog/a-neural-network-for-machine-translation-at-production-scale/>.

worth having. The most beautiful desires are intentionless, fleeting and empty, like mass entertainment.¹⁵³

The use of the term “boredom” or “boring” in Lin’s work is often accompanied by the term “emotion” or “mood”; for example, another poem in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* describes “[a]irports, shopping malls, and golf courses” as “mood-inducing delivery systems”¹⁵⁴ (we might here recall Roquet’s “mood-regulation” novel), and the protagonist of *The Patio and the Index* describes his father’s patio-building project as “ambient and mood-inducing in a kind of nonessential way.”¹⁵⁵ Lin’s frequent use of the word “mood” invokes Heidegger’s notion of *Stimmung*, already referenced in my survey of theories of ambience in the last chapter. For Heidegger, the “fundamental attunement [*Stimmung*]” is boredom, which he characterizes at one point in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* as “mak[ing] everything of equally great and equally little worth.”¹⁵⁶ In *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, too, boredom appears as the primary mood, with statements such as “human reading habits ... are deeply repetitive and boring,” or “most poems ... are not redundant or boring or ambient or generic or flat or iterative or fringe-like or soft enough.”¹⁵⁷ In his contribution to an issue of the journal *New Formations* entitled “Mood Work,” Michael E. Gardiner characterizes “boredom” as “a tangible if characteristically ambivalent (and *ambient*) mood or affective condition that relates to modes of capitalist production in specific ways.”¹⁵⁸ Glossing sociologist Orrin E. Klapp’s book *Overload and*

¹⁵³ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 129 (brackets in original).

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁵⁵ Lin, *Patio*.

¹⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 137.

¹⁵⁷ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 104, 164.

¹⁵⁸ Michael E. Gardiner, “The Multitude Strikes Back? Boredom in an Age of Semiocapitalism,” *New Formations* 82 (2014), 31 (my emphasis).

Boredom, Gardiner notes that “boredom is primarily the result of a dearth of intelligible signs and symbols ... or, much more commonly today, a superfluity of meanings that overwhelm the perceiver, because we lack the time, or the appropriate ‘filtering’ capacities, to make sense of this information adequately.”¹⁵⁹ The similarity in effect between information lack and information overload in the neoliberal weaponization of information resonates with Schmidt’s definition of ambience as ubiquity, in which the figure-ground dissolution can result in either a nearly imperceptible “background” or a trance-like “foreground” phenomenon.¹⁶⁰ It also mirrors what I have described as the dual potential of ambience itself, able to encompass both the insidiousness of neoliberal technological control and the potential emancipation of the subject via connection with the natural world.

The poem concerning boredom and “[m]ass individualization” quoted above also states, “Every era manufactures the most beautiful and concealed forms of political inertia, impersonality, and apathy (ours are shopping and reading and architecture), and in this way creates the obvious routes to the freedom it imagines.”¹⁶¹ The line following the body text reads, “Bewes, 105.” Although the poem contains no direct citations, the book by Bewes referenced here is likely *Reification*, considering the plagiarized Acknowledgments I noted earlier. The top of page 105 of *Reification* continues, from the previous page, a gloss of Jean Baudrillard’s formulation of resistance to power through “subjective ‘disappearance,’” wherein “apathy” is characterized as one method that can create “an absence which mirrors the logic of the system itself and which ‘becomes the sign of its own death.’”¹⁶² After the end of this paragraph, Bewes

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶⁰ Schmidt, “Ambience and Ubiquity,” 181-2.

¹⁶¹ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 129.

¹⁶² Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (New York; London: Verso, 2002), 105.

goes on to discuss an alternate line of reasoning by Theodor Adorno, arguing that due to modernity's "encoding of power within ever more impersonal institutional structures," revolutionary consciousness "loses its self-identity" along with its "visible antagonist"; the notion of a "subjective resistance to commodification" is thus itself inextricably "implicated in the processes of commodification."¹⁶³

It is, of course, impossible to state whether or not Lin's poem endorses Bewes' text or even actually 'means' to reference it explicitly; regardless, however, Baudrillard's and Adorno's arguments about the impotence of the 'revolutionary subject' under increasingly diffuse, invisible—one might say "ambient"—power structures are useful as a way of examining the tensions implicit in the poem's praise of affective flatness. *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* resists taking an explicit political stance on the hegemony of "[m]ass individualization" of culture: for example, is the speaker's assertion that the "most beautiful desires are intentionless, fleeting and empty, like mass entertainment," or its endorsement of "political inertia" as a "route to freedom," sincere or ironic?¹⁶⁴ Ultimately, it doesn't matter; for it functions to illustrate ambience as itself a state of ambivalence toward the potential of liberation under neoliberal technocapitalism.

Furthermore, although I have presented the logic of the "sign-as-information" metaphor thus far as functioning utterly distinct from "interpretation," this separation is also subverted by the text itself. Hayles notes that as a result of Shannon and Wiener's separation of information from meaning for the purposes of mathematical computation, "information" became canonized as "an entity that can flow unchanged between different material substrates."¹⁶⁵ In the reading

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 129.

¹⁶⁵ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 54.

system initiated by *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, “logo-like” signs can seemingly be transferred indiscriminately across all logical, formal, and material boundaries—just like data. However, the work’s blurring of the boundaries between the textual and the material also problematizes the supposedly essential “primitive,” “unmoving,” and “static” qualities of the sign-as-information espoused by “LOGO.”

Seven Controlled Vocabularies extends the reading/information processing system beyond writing to include images—a logo, after all, lies somewhere in between. The book is filled with black-and-white images, including but not limited to metro cards, IDs, merchandise tags, what appears to be an instruction manual, a fortune cookie, a blister pack of pills, a coaster, a book of matches, a sweater, and many back covers of books, CDs, and notebooks (see fig. 1). Often, the images include text, much of which is illegible due to the image being too small and/or too pixelated. This produces a method of reading that (literally) blurs the boundaries between images and text: “things that are blurred,” “LOGO” notes, are an example of “open-source reading codes.”



Figure 1. Examples of images included in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, L-R: p. 101, 94, 107.

In the section of poems entitled “A Field Guide to the American Landscape,” every other page contains only a small black-and-white photo of an outdoor architectural and/or natural scene, accompanied on the opposite page by what one might read as a kind of caption. One of these captions includes the following passage:

The least repetitive photographs are the photographs that make us forget the things that we love. That is why most landscapes are so boring to look at. A beautiful landscape is like a beautiful photograph is like a beautiful landscape is like a beautiful photograph. Such photographs erase people, relatives, household objects, other photographs, and landscapes at a steady velocity ... the photograph seems to repeat itself endlessly, just like our feelings do. That is why photographs of landscapes or people or nature are usually meaningless.¹⁶⁶

It is unclear whether the “least repetitive photographs” are fundamentally different from those that “repeat [themselves] endlessly.” On a more literal level, however, it is true that the photographs in this section of the book *are* repetitive: they appear in uniform intervals and sizes, and, although each image shows a different scene, the content is never directly referred to by the corresponding caption, causing them to lose any functional semiotic differentiation. Furthermore, the title “A Field Guide to the American Landscape” implies that the section can be read as a sort of taxonomy organizing a set of identifying information about “the American landscape,” lending the images a certain conceptual exchangeability. Just as, in “PRADA,” “Elm Place,” “Elm Tree Lane,” and “Ellingham” can be read as individual, functionally indistinguishable iterations of a sign that *stands in for* “private, gated communities throughout North America,”¹⁶⁷ a photograph of a landscape “erase[s]...landscapes” because it *stands in for* the concept of the landscape itself. “A beautiful landscape is like a beautiful photograph is like a beautiful landscape...” and so

¹⁶⁶ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 48.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 66.

on.¹⁶⁸ Each landscape photograph *does* ultimately “[resemble] nothing but itself,” but this “it” is not a self-same “it”: for, what the photographs also resemble, considered under the heading “A Field Guide to the American Landscape,” is simply “the American landscape.” A slippage is thus introduced between a photograph and its content; between signifier and signified.

The function of the sign as automated interpretation, however, holds not only in the realm of photographs and writing—which are, of course, inherently mediated through a semiotic process—but also of what we might vulgarly and provisionally call ‘things in the world.’ Here, I would like to tease out an essential tension that emerges in the slippage between sign and material referent. The section following “A Field Guide to the American Landscape,” entitled “American Architecture Meta Data Containers,” contains a prose poem called “MOLD”:

Mold multiplies on existing structures where abortive mimicry takes the form of routine contrivance: carpets unrolled from shop entrances onto sidewalks, trash cans provided for customer convenience, ATMs installed in the front wall of a shop, banners, chained down sandwich boards, umbrellas, potted trees, public clocks, plastic flags on a string, Xmas lights, merchandise racks, menu boards, awnings. Mold, like airborne litter, feels redundant, spatially indifferent, and highly absorptive. As a mode of spatial indecisiveness, it spreads noise, flutter, and static in its path: shelf-talkers under vodka bottles, TV monitors above selling floors, fall-out litter in magazines, seasonal cardboard display stands in grocery store aisles, canned music, or even people—who work as greeters, survey takers, Ronald McDonald clowns, or seasonal Santa Clauses.¹⁶⁹

Over the course of the poem, our ability to define the speaker’s use of the word “mold” becomes increasingly unstable. The first sentence appears to discuss the growth of fungus on certain architectural or industrial forms, such as carpets or merchandise racks. However, by the second

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 84.

list of items, it becomes unclear what they are serving an example of; the “noise, flutter, and static” that Mold generates, or Mold itself?

The poem continues:

Ironically, indoor Mold replicates Nature or items imported from peripheral geographies: as with survey takers and Santa Clauses mentioned above, but more obviously with engineered fake palm trees/flowers, fountains, vendors’ carts, or the ubiquitous “park” benches found inside shopping malls. Similarly, outdoor Mold imitates man-made structures, as with the McDonalds on 42nd Street in New York, where the golden arches are replaced by a theatre marquee in order to blend in with the neighborhood. Mold is an oscillating parameter. The shopping mall is a suburban foliage “exchanged” for something it is not: a park enclosed by a street whose cars have been removed.¹⁷⁰

Here, it becomes clearer that the speaker is discussing something like the repetitive and indistinguishable manmade objects that have come to designate (sub)urban public buildings around the globe, particularly American commercial establishments (e.g. the references to McDonald’s). The poem thus also recalls the definition of “mold” as a hollow cast and the infinite identical forms it produces, or as “a distinctive and typical style, form, or character”¹⁷¹: late capitalist consumerism literally and materially proliferates itself, like ‘natural’ mold does—but in the form of mass-produced goods and identical shopping malls and fast food chains.

The ambient, automated exchange of signs expands beyond the confines of writing or photographs to the world at large. The work of poetic metaphor is literalized; the golden arches of McDonald’s *are* Mold, and they continue to be Mold even when they no longer look like the McDonald’s logo but are “replaced by a theatre marquee in order to blend in with the neighborhood.” Mold is given descriptions that one might usually use for processes of artistic

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ OED.

tekhnē, such as poetry, architecture, or sculpture: it “replicates Nature,” “imitates man-made structures,” and “exchanges” foliage for a shopping mall, just as “LOGO” ‘exchanges’ the Bible for *Dogs that Know When Their Owners are Coming Home*. *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* thus constructs the entire world as a material repository of signs, which proliferate, expand, and exchange indiscriminately following a mysterious logic that appears to belong to no one in particular. Mold is literally an “oscillating parameter.”

In “Print is Flat, Code Is Deep: In Defense of Material-Specific Analysis,” Hayles illustrates differences between analog and digital processes via comparisons to written language. Locating the fundamental difference in analog’s reliance on “morphological resemblance” in contrast to digital’s reliance on discrete units of information, she writes that iconographic script is analog due to its “morphological resemblance to its referent,” whereas “alphabetic writing is digital ... precisely because the relation between mark and referent is arbitrary.”¹⁷² Human learning of alphabetical languages begins with “the digital method of sounding out each letter,” but eventually progresses to the “[analog] continuity of pattern recognition” based on the morphological resemblance of “the shapes of words and phrases.”¹⁷³

Although Hayles’ distinction between iconographic and alphabetic writing is an oversimplification in practice—few languages are truly iconographic, as most use arbitrary, phonetic marks as well as morphological, mimetic ones—this dualism is useful in illustrating the canonical binary between the continuous analog and the discrete digital. The ambient reading system of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, however—although clearly evoking information technologies’ reliance on the arbitrariness of data as discrete numerical representation—

¹⁷² Hayles, “Print is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” 76.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 78.

functionally incorporates both analog *and* digital modes of signification. It is a fundamentally ‘digital’ system in that it relies on the unit of the sign and its potential for substitution; however, this unit can take any form, and the logic, or ‘algorithm,’ behind any given substitution—or system of substitutions—is itself infinitely mutable. It can be inferred that a photograph of a landscape exchanges for a landscape based on isomorphic resemblance; similarly, a park might be replaced by a shopping mall in “MOLD” based on their shared physical features, including “palm trees/flowers, fountains, vendors’ carts,” and “‘park’ benches.”¹⁷⁴ However, this is not true, for example, of “Santa Clauses” and “public clocks,” also both forms of Mold that appear to belong to that category somewhat arbitrarily. It thus remains impossible to define what the exact requisites for “mold-ness” are.

Perhaps a visual theory would help us here. In “Meditations on a Hobby Horse, or the Roots of Artistic Form,” art historian E. H. Gombrich rejects the definition of “representation” in the work of art as the artist’s mimetic “imitation” of the “external form” of an object, which the spectator then recognizes based on this form.¹⁷⁵ Instead, he puts forth a definition of artistic representation as “to ‘stand for, be specimen of, fill place of, be substitute for.’”¹⁷⁶ In other words, a hobby horse ‘represents’ a horse not because it shares some essential visual characteristics with an iconic horse—after all, it has a stick for a body—but because it can *substitute for* a horse. The “common denominator between the symbol and the thing symbolized,” Gombrich argues, is thus “not the ‘external form’ but the *function*”—or, rather, “that formal aspect which fulfill[s] the minimum requirement for the performance of the

¹⁷⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 84.

¹⁷⁵ E. H. Gombrich, “Meditations on a Hobby Horse, or the Roots of Artistic Form,” in *Aspects of Form* (London: Lund Humphries, 1968), 210.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

function.”¹⁷⁷ For example, if the primary function of a hobby horse is to be ridden, as Gombrich argues, then “any ‘rideable’ object could serve as a horse.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, the “function” of a symbol—what makes a representation-substitution ‘work’—is always constituted through the relation between the work and the beholder-*qua*-user. For example, a child who has never seen a hobby horse before will likely not know to ride it, and “the same stick that had to represent a horse in [one] setting” could “become the substitute of something else in another.”¹⁷⁹ An image is always perceived in relation to other images, and at each moment, there is the possibility for “a new frame of reference” to be created, “a new context” in which the image “plays a different part.”¹⁸⁰ Gombrich’s description of the systematization of images is thus remarkably similar to Derrida’s notion of language, in which signs are inscribed in an endless chain of reiteration, their ‘meanings’ able to shift with each new substitution—a view of signification in terms of function, not mimetic representation.

In one poem, the speaker declares, “Mies was wrong. Function erases form and makes it fuzzy,”¹⁸¹ thus upending the famous mantra of modernist architecture “form follows function,” here misattributed to Mies van der Rohe. In “MOLD,” on the contrary, we are left only with “form”: the knowledge of what Mold manifests *as*, rather than *how* it ‘works.’ Gombrich ends his essay by positing that no artist “could make the hobby horse mean to us what it meant to its first creator.”¹⁸² In Lin’s text, however—as in Derrida—there is no “first creator.” There is no clearly identified “creator” at all. It is as if Lin is writing *from the point of view of the system*

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 214 (my emphasis), 213.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 222, 221.

¹⁸¹ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 85.

¹⁸² Gombrich, “Meditations on a Hobby Horse,” 222.

itself—a system of endless flow, of signs-as-information, exchanged and translated based on a “function” that might change at any moment.

For example, the poem on the page following “MOLD” contains the sentence, “What is the relation between moss on a building and a bar code?”¹⁸³ 50 pages later, in the section titled “A Dictionary of Systems Theory,” is a poem called “MOSS,” excerpted here:

What are the less than decisive frontiers and decorative surface tectonics of American reading today? Newsstands, coffee kiosks, food courts, shoe-shine stands, duty-free shops, public restrooms, etc. appear to us as intimate hallucinations ... Nomadic, Moss disperses indoors, perfumed through the floors of large corporate offices like a schedule arranging and re-arranging its décor against a backdrop of open cubicles, conference rooms, pods, supply closets, unisex washrooms, employee lounges, office suites, or stalls that beget further variability and surface treatments. What is an office but a series of facsimiles, internal memos, candlestick charts, calendars, bar graphs, zip-code maps, Post-its, and questionnaires circulated in a place where all communication and announcements are filtered as *inter alia* background. Moss encompasses any Mobile Optical Semiotic Surface where privacy is attenuated and *hypotyposis* results.¹⁸⁴

The description in “MOSS” is remarkably similar to “MOLD”: both describe a set of generic objects of American public architecture. Although no examples of Mold are repeated exactly in Moss, many are very similar: what, functionally, distinguishes “seasonal cardboard display stands” (Mold) from “[n]ewsstands” (Moss), “vendors’ carts” (Mold) from “coffee kiosks” (Moss), “merchandise racks” (Mold) from “duty-free shops” (Moss), or “trash cans provided for customer convenience” (Mold) from “public restrooms” (Moss)? In this way, Moss and Mold resemble each other just like actual moss and mold, which, in many non-biological contexts, are also functionally interchangeable: save that we usually associate mold with indoor spaces and moss with outdoor spaces, both organisms flourish in damp habitats on the surfaces

¹⁸³ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 85.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

of other objects and seem to spread themselves ‘automatically’ throughout an environment.

Similarly, the only apparent distinction between “Moss” and “Mold” is that the former generally appears to designate office architecture, whereas the latter seems to describe commercial retail architecture—but this is never specified by the text itself.

The other difference is that “MOSS” is related expressly to reading: more specifically, it describes a “Mobile Optical Semiotic Surface where privacy is attenuated and *hypotyposis* results.” “Hypotyposis,” defined by the *OED* as a “vivid description of a scene, event, or situation, bringing it, as it were, before the eyes of the hearer or reader,” was a figure of speech in ancient Greek rhetoric that denoted a description so realistic as to produce the effect of immediately experiencing the thing described.¹⁸⁵ In other words, it denotes the ability of language to appear to eliminate its own mediating function.¹⁸⁶

In *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, ambient reading, or the “decorative surface tectonics of American reading today,” manifests in the experience of the world *as* language, yet as language that continually erases itself: both surface and “inter alia background.” Furthermore, this discursive attunement does not result secondarily from some pre-existing perceptual or sensorial field. “Mobile *Optical Semiotic Surface*”: *signification is perceptual*, not derivative of it. It is that which allows the world to come into being in the first place.

The description of the “surface tectonics of American reading” as generic office as “series of facsimiles, internal memos, candlestick charts, calendars” as Mobile Optical Semiotic Surface as *hypotyposis* is nothing other than the recognition that the world in *Seven Controlled*

¹⁸⁵ *OED*, quoted in Byron Ashley Clugston, *Hypotyposis in Kant’s Metaphysics of Judgment: Symbolizing Completeness* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 1.

¹⁸⁶ Kant used the term in the *Critique of Judgment* to refer to “presentation, *subjecto sub adspectum*...as making something sensible,” where the presentation is “an a priori element of thought whose character is imparted by the faculty in question.” (Clugston, *Hypotyposis in Kant’s Metaphysics of Judgment*, 2).

Vocabularies is a world encountered by reading, and also that reading produces “sense,” in both the abstract and haptic definitions. Moss “disperses indoors” like perfume or “intimate hallucinations”¹⁸⁷; Mold is “highly absorptive” and “spreads noise, flutter, and static in its path.”¹⁸⁸ The prose in “MOLD” is bookended by keyboard symbols—“/**#@+” underneath the title, “/ **#@-*” next to the page number—rendering typography as mold itself, proliferating on the corners of the page as it would on a bathroom tile.¹⁸⁹ The use of text-as-image and vice versa points itself to the materiality of the textual and the textual of the visual—words are blurred into texture; photographic texture becomes words.

I hope I have made clear through these ‘close’ readings that, despite the advocacy in “LOGO” for writing as a “primitive and unmoving [structure] for the channeling of static information,”¹⁹⁰ the metaphorical structure of signification in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*—though possessing a seemingly unlimited scope—is not divorced from materiality. On the contrary the two become so closely related so as to be functionally indistinguishable: *the sign is material*, and *the material is textual*. Furthermore, this operation also exposes the materiality of the informatic itself, such as in the visible pixelation of many of the images in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, which expose the inescapable texture of the digital. After all, no signal is possible without noise, like static, or blurriness, or paratext.

The fundamental ambivalence of the text with regard to ambience’s cooptation by structures of power might be compared to the way it deals with the function of semiotic structure itself—the ultimate impossibility of determining an essential *origin to* or *cause of* the imbrication

¹⁸⁷ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 135.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 70.

of metaphor and materiality. In “LOGO,” the speaker remarks that “open-source reading code[s]” such as logos “can be read” as “exemplars of a *fonctionnalité absent*”: French for “absent function” or “functionality,” “*fonctionnalité*” being also a word often used when speaking of a tool, website, or software.¹⁹¹ This is exactly the mechanism at work in “MOLD” and “MOSS”: the metaphorically-instantiated relations between terms is dependent upon the absence of a clearly definable *logic* to those substitutions; of the knowledge what, exactly, makes “calendars” (Moss) different from “menu boards” (Mold). Just like sound, the medium from which ambience arose, can be perceived separately from knowledge of its ‘source,’ the ambient, non-conscious circulation of metaphor has no apparent origin or end (both in the sense of “conclusion” and of “goal”). It is impossible to lay bare what exactly differentiates commercial Mold from “a logo [corporate Moss].”¹⁹² The *fonctionnalité* is always, inescapably, to a greater or lesser extent, *absent*. This is what makes language technical, in Stiegler’s formation: it relies on the logic of the Derridean supplement, both ‘added-to’ and ‘constitutive-of.’

By performing the technicity of signification, Lin’s employment of language-as-technology also reveals its necessary capacity to be automated, with the habitual use of concepts becoming mechanical just like a computer’s conversion of data formats. This automaticity is predicated upon a certain non-interpretative, unknowable function. As discussed in the previous chapter, theories of ambience predicate their liberating capacity on the “pre-reflective” character of sensory experience, the “ecological” nature of which dissolves the separation between individual and environment.¹⁹³ In this chapter, I tried to show that *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁹² Ibid., 136.

¹⁹³ Thibaud, “From situated perceptions to urban ambiances,” 4.

presents a different perspective: one in which the sensory and the discursive, the material and the textual, are inseparable because of the inherent *discursivity* and *textuality* of perceptual experience. *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* resists a reading that praises materiality as inherently liberating: if ubiquitous computing tells us anything, our senses are just as programmable as our language.

3. READING THE GENERIC

In the last chapter, I argued that Tan Lin's *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* theorizes and performs the automaticity of discursive signification as a chain of substitutions, doing so through the description of a generalized, flattened reading mechanism that carries the potential to exchange and transform the identity of all objects of perception and experience as textual signs, by a logic that is never fully graspable. This attention to the technicity of discourse as an ambient, non-conscious system, working independently of any one 'reader's' control or interpretation, shows also that language has a fundamentally ambiguous, ever-mutable relation to power. The poems in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* make repeated statements about how the ideal work of art 'should' be and what it 'should' do. However, the playful ambivalence of these same statements, which appear themselves infinitely mutable, renders it impossible to distill these pronouncements into a specific model of such an ideal artwork. Mapes-Frances remarks that "[e]very time Lin facetiously declaims, throughout [*Seven Controlled Vocabularies*], how a poem today should be(come), he is not so much answering this practical question as *opening* it."¹⁹⁴

The Patio and the Index was published online in October 2011 in the literary magazine *Triple Canopy*. The subtitle reads: "Or 'The Anthropology of Forgetting in Everyday Life.' A sampled novel. Alt: A field guide to a family." The work is an excerpt from what would become Lin's first full-length novel, *Our Feelings Were Made By Hand* (forthcoming). Although one could argue that its status as an excerpt from a longer work and its relatively short length might

¹⁹⁴ Mapes-Frances, "Reading Machines," 93.

make the designation “novella” more accurate, I will refer to *The Patio and the Index* (hereafter *Patio*) as a novel, both to honor Lin’s designation and to reduce confusion in my discussion of the novel “genre” to come.

In stark contrast to *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, which explicitly throws genre categories into question at every turn—recall the subtitle “AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE”—*Patio* adheres to most tropes of literary realism. The novel features consistent first-person narration and centers the story of one character’s life, particularly his childhood and the death of his father, through scenes that are consistent in content with things that could happen in ‘real life’ (many *did*, in fact, ‘actually’ happen, an aspect I will return to in a moment). Following an analysis of a work as fragmented and non-narrative as *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, which advocates for a literature of “sensory deprivation and disordered or arbitrary input that has been channeled or reduced to non-stimuli,”¹⁹⁵ it might appear counterintuitive to use the phrase “ambient reading” to describe a realist novel, a form described by influential literary theorist Georg (György) Lukács as aiming to relate “each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolised by the story of his life.”¹⁹⁶ Whereas theories of ambience, as I have shown in Chapter 1, aim explicitly to *dissolve* the subject-object relation, the novel is thus traditionally understood as taking “the subject” as its primary concern, which Lukács characterizes as dependent upon the construction of “mutually alien worlds of subject and object.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* 162.

¹⁹⁶ Georg (György) Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 81.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 74-5.

In this chapter, extrapolating from the subtitle “[a] sampled novel,” I examine *Patio* through the concepts of “sampling”—which I will also call “citation”—and “genre” (with related terms like “generic”). I aim to show how, contrary to Lukács’s formulation (which, as I note later on, Lukács himself acknowledges as paradoxical), the manifestation of “ambient reading” in the text once again exposes the diffuse, non-hierarchized, and non-individual nature of signification, thereby *problematizing* the unity of subjectivity even as it is narrated from the point of view of a first-person ‘subject.’ I draw from Timothy Bewes’ discussion of the “postfictional” logic of the novel in *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (2022), as well as Derrida’s essay “The Law of Genre,” to argue that *Patio*’s ambience exposes the paradoxical nature of “genre” itself, used here as an expanded term for taxonomic symbolic relations: the precarity of its construction as well as its simultaneous material, authoritative effects. If *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, then, presents a sprawling, generalized theory of ambient reading packaged within a book that is just as much a work of philosophy or painting as poetry, I would like to view *Patio* as an exploration of the implications of the same formal logic through the ostensibly more ‘bounded’ genre of the novel. In this chapter, I thus attempt to start within the confines of the novel genre and ‘work my way out’ through ambience.

In the same year as *Patio*, Lin also published *Insomnia and the Aunt*, a short “ambient novel” about a Chinese aunt who runs a motel in Washington and always has the TV on. *Insomnia and the Aunt* includes many statements reminiscent of the philosophical declarations in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, ventriloquized by the narrator and the aunt and given a slightly more emotional register: “she thinks America is basically not a place or even an image, but furniture ... The more I miss her the more she becomes furniture or a TV commercial for Tide

detergent.”¹⁹⁸ Although *Patio* is certainly not without such jarring metaphorical formulations, its general mode of narration stays, at least at first glance, even closer to everyday language.

Following his father’s death, *Patio*’s protagonist recalls his childhood in Athens, Ohio, where his parents had settled after immigrating to the United States from China, in what might traditionally be called a ‘stream-of-consciousness’-style narrative. Although the narrator meanders between topics, many of them return to reflections about his father:

It was not until the fifth grade that I learned that my father—in addition to being a liar, a semi-recreational drug user, an undiagnosed depressive ... our dad—was also a builder of things, a putterer, and a general contractor of the mildly impractical architecture of our lives.¹⁹⁹

The “impractical architecture of our lives” is thus explored in the story through its loose revolution around the father’s home improvement projects; specifically, his construction of a patio in their backyard in the late 1970s.

Although the narrator-protagonist remains unnamed, the novel does feature the real names, photographs, and other biographical information of Lin’s actual life and family members; for example, the protagonist’s sister is named Maya (Tan Lin’s sister is the architect Maya Lin); Lin also grew up in Athens, Ohio; and his father, Henry Lin, taught ceramics at Ohio University, as does the father in *Patio*—the text includes a newspaper clipping with the headline “Ceramicist, Henry Lin Has Opening Of Exhibition.” Since 2011, Lin has published several other pieces on the same subject—some version of his own family—in various publications,

¹⁹⁸ Tan Lin, *Insomnia and the Aunt* (Chicago: Kenning Editions, 2011), 20.

¹⁹⁹ Lin, *Patio* (unpaginated).

which are sometimes labeled “essays” and contain much of the same information as the narrator of *Patio* relates about his childhood.²⁰⁰

I am not interested in further parsing the facticity of individual biographical details in the novel, but instead wish to call attention to this arguably ‘auto-fictive’ gesture as a signal of Lin’s interest in genre categorization as such. Whereas *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* works to blend signifiers of genre categories together, *Patio* intentionally labels itself a “novel” in order to show the contingency of the boundary between “truth” and “fiction.” The generic process by which an object, or sign, or collection of signs, comes to be classified as belonging to a certain category—and how the same object, or sign, or collection of signs can also continually be ‘read’ otherwise—becomes generalized in *Patio* as a mode of perceiving the world at large. As with *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, I will begin with an inventory of the novel’s format and paratext, before showing how the same principles manifest in the work’s narrative ‘themes.’

Triple Canopy has experimented with online publishing in various reading formats since its first issue in 2008, but all of them have been designed horizontally, rather than the standard webpage’s vertical scroll. Although the majority of these retain a version of the page-by-page E-book format, *Patio* was published in a period during which the publication had shifted toward a design called “Horizonize,” a continuous horizontal scroll of short vertical columns (see fig. 1). *Triple Canopy*’s explicit effort to produce “a greater degree of plasticity” than the page-by-page format “in keeping with the increased fluidity of reading, viewing, and interacting online,” resonates with the clear influence of online reading practices on the disjointed form of *Seven*

²⁰⁰ See “A False Accounting,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (2016); “A Few Versions of Earliness,” *Triple Canopy* (2018); “A Brief History of Sweetness in America,” *Frieze* (2020); *The Fern Rose Bibliography* (New York: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, 2021).



the patio and the index

by Tan Lin

Or "The Anthropology of Forgetting in Everyday Life." A sampled novel. Alt: A field guide to a family.

"The Patio and the Index" was produced by Triple Canopy as part of its *Immaterial Literature* project area, supported in part by the Brown Foundation, Inc. of Houston, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Left-hand map by Clare Churchhouse, scanned by Anthony Lofton; right-hand map by Dan Visuel.

Chapter 1

One of the things that a parent's life does, in death, is return the lives that came after it, much as an index does, and here I am thinking of my life, or one of the many versions of a childhood that an adult comes into possession of. My childhood's childhood, the Chinese childhood enmeshed inside a Western one, was mostly a high school affair, and it was mostly a life of the various projects my father undertook at 30 Cable Lane, in Athens, Ohio, when I was between the ages of twelve and seventeen and my sister was between ten and fifteen. Because my father was a ceramicist, most of his projects had to do with clay prepared from what I called slush or slip, which was kept in three aluminum garbage cans in the three-car garage that he had converted, with minor modification, into a studio. Many things my father made there were thrown away. What he derisively called "bad pots," and this included even slightly off-center ones, were punched in and tossed into one of the garbage cans, where, with the help of water from a garden hose, they would dissolve into fossils of pot-like forms. Dissolving a clay form in a garbage can of slip was not fast, and my father was in no rush to hurry the process. As a result, the galvanized cans were arranged in a lazy



sort of chronology along a wall, and like my father's life and death, they suggested a clock's hands ticking backward and in slow motion. To someone in high school, the garbage cans with pots dissolving inside them suggested that the world keeps time mainly by losing track of it.

All of the clay in the studio was thus either slip, on its way to slip, plastic-wrapped wet clay ready for kneading and throwing, or bagged, unmixed dry

clay and slush to something as or "greenware," in our garage, called in a bin to called "pots." Cable Lane for 2000, my sister an accounting

Figure 1. Screenshot of *The Patio and the Index*. Triple Canopy, accessed on March 8, 2024, https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the_patio_and_the_index?ui.header=true

Controlled Vocabularies (and almost all of Lin's other works).²⁰¹ However, while the fragmented organization of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* encourages nonlinear reading, "Horizonize" is an extremely, even frustratingly, linear design. The scrollbar at the bottom of the page does not allow the reader to jump directly between two noncontinuous points in the text, as the standard scrollbar would; skipping ahead to the end is thus permitted only by flying through the entire length of the piece at a certain maximum speed. While *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* explicitly endorses skimming, the presentation of *Patio* actively discourages it; notably, *Triple Canopy* declared their project in 2010 as an aim to "slow down the internet."²⁰²

²⁰¹ "About | Triple Canopy," accessed March 8, 2024, <https://canopycanopycanopy.com/about>.

²⁰² "About | Triple Canopy," quoting "The Binder and the Server," a memoir-manifesto published in 2010." The "About" section notes that "later, in recognition of the erosion of the line between 'online' and 'offline,' we pivoted to 'slow down the world.'"

Patio continuously calls attention to—and strains against—the linearity and horizontality of its own format. Throughout the text, the narrator references images that are included “below,” e.g., “Below is a photograph of an animal I made when I was seven.”²⁰³ These images, however—if they are included at all—are found not ‘below,’ but by scrolling to the right: a more accurate word might be “further,” “across,” or simply “later.” *Patio* also includes an actual index at the end wherein some terms are hyperlinks that, when clicked, automatically scroll the page backward to a certain point in the text. The index encourages a re-traversal of the novel by theme or phrase rather than a linear narrative structure—literally, by function of a controlled vocabulary system, recalling the thematization of language-based taxonomies in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*.

Perhaps most notably, the horizontal ‘page’ is peppered with footnotes, usually at the top or bottom margin, that take the form of screenshots of reverse Google Search results of certain phrases from the text. For example, several columns after the first footnote, appearing after the phrase “semi-mythological Ohio woods,” a screenshot of a link to a PBS Kids webpage graces the bottom of the page (see fig. 2). These footnotes often appear much later in the text than the phrase they are linked to, or even precede it, forcing the reader to scroll backward or forward in order to compare ‘signified’ (footnote screenshot) to matching ‘signifier’ (footnote number in the text) and vice versa. Because the footnotes are *images* of hyperlinks, they are not clickable: they thus function as formal gestures to the fragmented process of digital textuality, blurring the boundary between text and image and lending a materiality to the aesthetics of online text—in another echo of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*. They thus gesture to the fact that the narrative

²⁰³ Lin, *Patio*.

apparatus of *Patio*, although set mostly in a pre-World Wide Web era, is situated at least partially within the paradigm of hypertextual reading online—while simultaneously resisting an actual hypertextual organization. In contrast to *Triple Canopy*'s original aim to “create a richer, more coherent experience of online reading,” though, *Patio*'s structure seems to intentionally generate a certain in-coherence.²⁰⁴

¹ [Backyard Jungle . ohio woods by gizmo | PBS Kids GO](#)close this window.
 Send to a Friend. Backyard [ohio woods](#). by gizmo. Backyard Map,
 Discoveries Here · Backyard Info · Privacy Policy .
[pbskids.org/backyardjungle/ yards/detail/view.php?id=347213](#) - 5k - [Cached](#) -
[Similar page](#)

Figure 2. Footnote 1. Lin, *Patio*.

We might use this emphasis on disjuncture and nonlinearity as an entry point into the work's peculiar genre distinction, “A sampled novel.” The word “sampled” evokes the act of taking an individual part or instance as representative of a whole, in order to evaluate or study it—perhaps a reference to *Patio*'s status as an excerpt of a longer work. It also denotes the musical production technique known as “sampling,” a process of “record[ing] or extract[ing] a small piece of music or sound digitally for reuse as part of a composition or song.”²⁰⁵ This likely refers to the novel's inclusion of both real biographical information and elements of other existing media objects, a “sampling” of Lin's own life and other texts: speaking in 2010 about the process of writing what may have ended up as *Patio* and/or *The Insomnia and the Aunt*, Lin describes

²⁰⁴ “About | Triple Canopy.”

²⁰⁵ *OED*.

“taking material from the newspaper or magazines and then loosely rewriting it as if it had happened to me.”²⁰⁶

Techniques of appropriation and reuse appear throughout *Patio*, although less explicitly so than in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*. This occurs most notably with the screenshot-footnotes, which, instead of providing further detail about a specific moment in the text, simply parrot back the same words used in the narration—helpfully formatted in bold font—but found in completely unrelated texts (see fig. 2). Footnote 11—which, unlike most of the footnotes, takes up its own column on the page, interrupting the body text mid-sentence—contains three search results in which the word “happiness,” along with “recovery,” “recover,” and/or “recovered,” are bolded. It also precedes its own reference in the text, marker and referent separated by a huge image of a hammer and a pair of shears (see fig. 3). The passage that includes the footnote reads:

In this way, so many of the things in our house, like our general sense of familial relations (unhappiness and happiness), were always getting misplaced. However, it is very beautiful to misplace happiness, for that is the only way it can be recovered.¹¹ My father could never find anything he needed...²⁰⁷

The related text in the footnote-screenshot includes, “How are sadness and **happiness** like diseases? They’re infectious...” (judging from the URL, an article from the *LA Times*); “**Recover** Lost Pictures And Restore **Happiness**” (from articlesnatch.com); ““**Return to happiness**’ program helps children recover from trauma...” (from UNICEF’s website); “TRANSFER OF CLOTHING / If your clothing is lost or misplaced, **the only way it can be recovered** is if it has been properly marked...” (from tpub.com) (see fig. 3).

²⁰⁶ Lin, “Ambiently breaking reading conventions.”

²⁰⁷ Lin, *Patio*.



Figure 3. Footnote 11 and following content. Lin, *Patio*.

Amid a passage reflecting on the misplacement of objects in a family, happiness being one of those objects, these footnotes achieve a darkly ironic, yet also poignant, tone. They are echoes of Lin's language literally mis-placed, wrenched out of completely different texts we cannot read fully, only see traces of (as the hyperlinks are not clickable). They are *citations*, which I introduce here as a more broadly textual term for the musical practice of "sampling": the extraction of a unit of content or meaning out of a larger work and its placement into a new context, thereby inscribing it within a new system of relations between terms.

In the essay "Signature/Event/Context," Derrida famously argues that the fact that a nonsense phrase (e.g., "the green is either") can still produce significance as "an *example of agrammaticality*" shows the "possibility of disengagement and citational graft which belongs to the structure of every mark ... which constitutes every mark in writing before and outside of

every horizon of semio-linguistic communication.”²⁰⁸ Signs are citational by their very nature; they function only by virtue of repetition and difference and thus always function to a certain extent independently of the moment of their inscription, or any “‘original’ desire-to-say-what-one-means [*vouloir-dire*].”²⁰⁹ In other words, the sign is constituted by its continual inscription and re-inscription within the structure of signification-*qua*-substitution, the linkages of which are always being produced anew.

In *Patio*, as in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, the potential for seemingly arbitrary substitutions of signs to produce new poetic objects and relations extends also to images. In addition to the footnotes, photographs and other images are distributed throughout the text, often interrupting the narration mid-sentence. Chapter 2, for example, contains an extended reflection on the family’s local department store, Buckeye Mart, which then went out of business and was replaced by a functionally identical store called Murphy’s Mart. The phrase “my father loved all these things in Buckeye Mart and later Murphy’s Mart without thinking, because they promised him what he really wanted from America: ” is followed by three consecutive images (see fig. 4). Only after the images, which fill the entire webpage when scrolling, falls the end of the sentence: “‘a farm with cattle heads on it’,” the phrase itself in quotes. This ending phrase might be read as a reshuffling of the quantifying expression “head of cattle,” although it is unclear from whom it is quoted—perhaps the protagonist’s father himself (I will return to the father’s use of language later).

²⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Signature/Event/Context,” in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 12.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

be half-repaired. And of course things like off-brand
shampoos and potato chips in cardboard tubes and
big television dish antennas, as well as a music
section where I got my first store-bought record
album, *Beatle Mania!*, “a collection of hits recorded
by the Liverpools” that I had confused with a real
Beatles record in middle school. It cost eighty-
seven cents. My first two actual albums, courtesy of
the mail-order Columbia Record Club,” were
Hamilton, Joe Frank & Reynolds (they are wearing
cowboy hats and boots on the cover) and then
Steppenwolf’s *Rest in Peace*, with its image of a
wolf that is probably a dog, a tombstone, and a
bunch of pink roses whose petals have fallen onto
the tombstone. With the exception of my records,
which my father did not associate with Ohio, my
father loved all these things in Buckeye Mart and
later Murphy’s Mart without thinking, because they
promised him what he really wanted from America:

non-violent architecture: design with
Professor of Geography University of Oklahoma,
academic/fellowships.html - 70k -



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Figure 4. Three consecutive images after the phrase “because they promised him what he really wanted from America.” Lin, *Patio*.

Because the images interrupt the sentence at the semicolon, they function as a kind of provisional answer to the question of what, “my father ... really wanted from America,” before the actual end of the sentence—a function heightened by the obscurity of the last phrase. The first two images appear to be family photos of some kind, so the last image—a spread from a circa ’70s catalog from The Boys’ Shop—seems at first quite out of place. Presented as a kind of triptych of “sampled,” or “cited,” images from elsewhere, with no explanation as to their source, certain visual resonances might emerge first. The first two are black and white, but the first looks

faded, a bit crumpled, likely older than the second: this might lead us to infer that one of the children in the first is one of the adults in the second. Although in color, the “Knit Sleepwear” advertised in the third image might resonate with the knit cardigans the figures in the second photograph wear. Furthermore, the more one looks at the three photos together, the more the composition of the images—the placement of the figures within the frame, the way their bodies are posed—begin to echo each other.

Beyond this limited visual analysis, we might return to the phrase preceding the images—what Buckeye Mart and Murphy’s Mart “promised” the protagonist’s father; or, “what he really wanted from America.” In light of this phrase, the inclusion of the commercial advertisement next to what look like family photos inscribe the father’s desires, as well as the motif of “family,” within the aesthetic (but not only aesthetic) system of mid-to-late 20th century American capitalism. Commercial images, designed to attract a large baseline demographic of potential consumers, are “generic”—as in, predictable, iterable, and unspecific—by design (“Advertising,” one poem in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* remarks, is “decreased information”²¹⁰). Family photos without any reference to a specific family—as, in this text, the first two images in the sequence appear—also often look “generic,” showing set of strangers whose relations are impossible to parse aside from a vague identification of “family.” And, both kinds of images—advertisements and family photos—could themselves be called “genres,” in the sense of “a category of artistic composition” (“artistic” here to be taken in view of the postmodern dissolution of the aesthetic and the commercial in Lin’s work, as outlined in Chapter 1).²¹¹

²¹⁰ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 86.

²¹¹ *OED*.

In his book on literary genre, John Frow notes that “genre” is “neither a *property* of (and located ‘in’) texts, nor a *projection* of (and located ‘in’) readers”: it is “a *function of reading*” itself, a “systemic” co-relation between readers and texts.²¹² Genre is always constructed, and thus, to a certain extent, arbitrary. *Patio* could theoretically have been labeled a memoir, or an essay, likely with no changes whatsoever to its content. A knitwear catalog and photos of people who may be family members become “generic,” defined by *OED* as “characteristic of or relating to a class or type of objects,” when presented as belonging to a set of things the narrator designates “what [my father] really wanted from America.” By virtue of their citation and re-inscription, the genres of the retail catalog and the family photo blur into each other.

The protagonist of *Patio* grew up in a suburban landscape of identical retail stores, to parents who continuously bought “American things, usually in multiple, of items that they might need in the future but had little need for in the present,” such that their “storage and pantries looked a little like shelves at Murphy’s Mart or Buckeye Mart.” Their backyard “got planted with more and more daffodils and miniature Korean lilacs and Japanese roses,” so that his mother thought it looked “like the continually replenished images from a magazine.”²¹³ This “childhood” and “family” cannot be separated from the various sets of semiotic relations that structured it, one of which is that of the habits and aesthetics of consumer capitalism. Viewed as a part of this ‘ecosystem,’ could not a Boys’ Shop catalog be just as much a ‘family photo’ as a photograph of people that may or may not be the protagonist’s (or author’s) parents?

This view is reflected in Chapter 1 of *Patio*, in which the narrator reflects:

²¹² John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 111, 112 (my emphasis).

²¹³ Lin, *Patio*.

Childhood is nothing but the objects that occur and change inside it. I do not think of this childhood as mine; it might have arrived a little after I had it, and one of the beauties of this or any childhood is that it doesn't belong to any of us. Childhood belongs to the thing known as "childhood," which it produces out of itself. Like most things ... my sister and I were objects in our own childhood...²¹⁴

Recognized only in retrospect, the protagonist's 'own' childhood is not a discrete object belonging to his 'own' life, but is inseparable from "the thing known as 'childhood,'" which might encompass any number of objects, people, or narrative conventions. "Childhood" is thus more of a *genre*—a system of relating a set of mutable objects under a single sign—than a static, individual object belonging to a unique person. Furthermore, this passage thus begins to reveal the counterintuitive co-constitution of a genre and its individual manifestations: the protagonist's 'own' childhood is simultaneously a *member* of the genre of "childhood" and also *produces* that same genre "out of itself." Importantly, the actual authority of genre—its ability to say anything specific about the objects it describes—is thus presented as a *problem*, rather than a given fact.

For the narrator, "childhood" not only belongs to no one individual, but even its 'individual' instantiation is only one of many. He notes at the very beginning of the novel that what the death of a parent "returns" can be formulated as "my life, or one of the many versions of a childhood that an adult comes into possession of." This sentence signals from the outset a structural iterability to the concepts of "life" and "childhood." If any given adult can possess "many versions of a childhood," then the text to follow, which narrates a childhood, is likely also only one of multiple possible versions of itself: just like any word inside a text, any moment in a life—speaking here of Lin's actual life and/or the life of the protagonist of *Patio*—can be "sampled" by infinite different narrations of that life.

²¹⁴ Lin, *Patio*.

This logic of iterability is echoed throughout the novel, and throws into question the linear chronological organization that the text's horizontal column-unit format—evoking the cell-by-cell progression of a film strip or a timeline—might initially imply. Early on, the narrator states, “I have drawn up a few maps and a timeline/list (below) to indicate some of the boundaries and rough chronological order of my father’s clay and half-clay projects.” No map or timeline/list actually appears until Chapter 3, though; there, one finds a list of his father’s building projects around the house and yard, ahead of which the narrator instructs, “Since I am forty-six, if you subtract the number (my age at the time) given in parentheses, you can get a pretty good idea of how long these projects have lasted inside the memories of their miscellaneous effects...” Judging by the ages in the parentheses, however, the list does not appear to be in chronological order at all, with the first two entries—“a potting shed that my friends in first grade thought was an outhouse (7)” and “a patio (16–17) (still standing)” —followed by “a minideck painted white (11).”²¹⁵

This list is followed by three maps: first, a hand-drawn map of the house and the surrounding grounds (see fig. 5a); second, a sort of chart made in what looks like a word processor entitled “A MAP OF MY FATHER’S (ENGLISH) PROJECTS midcentury” (see fig. 5b); and, last, what appears to be a detail from an old map of South America, but with most of the proper names replaced with places from the family’s home and the surrounding area, as well as phrases that appear often in the text (“PATIO,” “minideck,” “Murphy’s Mart,” “Buckeye Mart,” “author,” “(plan b)”) (see fig. 5c). The map is entitled “Childhood, Athens, OHIO,” with the subtitle “FUZHUO” (the hometown of the narrator’s father).

²¹⁵ Ibid.

According to the narrator, these three maps show the same thing: “some of the boundaries and rough chronological order of my father’s clay and half-clay projects.” However—being maps, or perhaps diagrams—they do not organize time in the chronology of a single linear dimension, but in two-dimensional space. The second map includes some dates, but they are out of order, and in unclear relation to other terms in the image. The third is an appropriative “citation,” or “sampling,” of an existing map, with new terms “grafted” on to construct a new “context.” The maps thus suggest not only that time can be rendered in nonlinear spatial form, but also that one of the text’s central interests is exploring the “many versions of a childhood”: the many ways its ‘content’—here, his father’s building projects—can be formally organized.²¹⁶

This nonlinear temporal-as-spatial structure mirrors the protagonist’s narration, which meanders between time periods by an unpredictable associative logic and mentions events several times before they are explained. At the end of Chapter 1, the narrator declares:

The most important object in family life at 30 Cable Lane was something my father, my mother, my sister, and I, along with a handful of graduate students, made from sand, a little bit of lime, and some discarded stone. This would be the summer of 1978, but it might just as easily be called a patio.²¹⁷

Although we are told it is the “most important object,” following this introduction, the word “patio” is only used in passing until Chapter 4, when “the summer of 1978” is finally narrated. The novel is comprised of four chapters, but the chapters do not organize it into a chronology or even four clearly identifiable ‘main events’: instead, the text’s motifs—including but not limited to clay, (mis)communication with the father, “Chinese”-ness and “American”-ness, the backyard,

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

and the commercial landscape of postwar America—seem to circulate freely around the story, often without clear direction or purpose. Furthermore, this quotation shows that, like *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, *Patio* employs an iterative substitutional mechanism: “a patio” is equivalent to “the summer of 1978,” as well as to “something my father, my mother, my sister, and I, along with a handful of graduate students, made from sand, a little bit of lime, and some discarded stone.” Thus, contrary to the narrator’s assertion of the primary importance of the patio, the text’s formal techniques initiate a logic whereby this supposed hierarchy of significance is continually undermined, a constant shifting of the boundary between “figure” and “ground” we might call “ambient.”

These techniques of subverting linear chronology and traditional narrative structure are implicated in *Patio*’s metafictional interventions into the “genre” of the novel itself. At the end of Chapter 2, the speaker states, “In my head there are thus always two plans, a Plan A and a Plan B, that describe a system and the unorganized traditions of a childhood.” Plan A, the speaker continues, “goes roughly like this, and it might read as a treatise on how to look at a photograph or diagram the delivery system that is a novel:”

I still have my father’s hammer and the last pair of lopping shears he used to cut down things in our garden ... that I gave to my father as a Christmas present two years before he decided to buy a house in Santa Barbara—and move away from Athens and my mother, calling out of the blue the next year and asking her to join him in California for the summers. And this my mother did till 1989, the year in which my father died of a heart attack.²¹⁸

The phrase “treatise on how to look at a photograph or diagram the delivery system that is a novel” recalls the aesthetic treatises that make up a large part of *Seven Controlled*

²¹⁸ Ibid.

Vocabularies, although the text that follows is quite different from the abstract description of a mechanical reading system. Instead, what “Plan A” catalogs is a narrative of what would traditionally, ‘generically,’ be considered ‘significant events’ in a person’s life—the sudden departure of the protagonist’s father, the fracturing of his parents’ relationship, and his father’s death—as symbolized by a ‘significant object’ associated with those events; the shears.

This passage marks the end of Chapter 2. Chapter 3, which carries the subtitle “(‘Plan B’) 1976,” begins, “And Plan B goes something like this, which I think of as the elongated architecture of a patio at the end of the Vietnam War, where a pair of lopping shears has the color of rust.” In Plan B, thus, there is no mention of the father’s departure or his death, and the central narrative symbol of Plan A—the pair of shears—is lent a kind of worn-out, accidental, or marginal status. Rather, the organizing principle of this system is “the elongated architecture of a patio at the end of the Vietnam War.” This phrase suggests both space and time, like Plan A’s chronological ordering, but how life events might actually be organized according to this “architecture” is difficult to conceive; and, although “the end of the Vietnam War” is a specific temporal marker, like “1976” in the chapter’s subtitle, it appears somewhat arbitrary with regard to the “architecture” of the patio itself (the Vietnam War is not mentioned elsewhere in the novel). The narrator goes on to launch into what appears to be a straightforward narration of the summer of the patio—“One summer after I came back from college my father came up with a project that was, like all my father’s projects, *ambient* and mood-inducing in a kind of nonessential way...”—but he quickly abandons it for a discussion of the father’s projects in general, which, he notes, “were all multiple and overlapping” anyway.²¹⁹ Chapter 3 ends soon

²¹⁹ Ibid (my emphasis).

afterward with the timeline and maps discussed earlier, and the construction of the patio is not narrated in detail until halfway through Chapter 4. Furthermore, the labeling of Plan B with “1976” contradicts the narrator’s earlier equation of the patio with the “summer of 1978,” which is reiterated in the novel’s index (in which the first entry reads, “1978, summer of (‘patio’)”)—thus calling into question the very reliability of temporal markers to reveal any stable or relevant information about the event.

“In the end,” the protagonist goes on to say, “Plan A and Plan B are probably identical.”²²⁰ In the index at the end of the work, the terms “novel” and “patio” hyperlink back to the exact same spot in the text: the discussion of “(‘Plan B’) 1976” beginning, “One summer...” The terms “novel” and “patio” are thus equivalent terms, both able to be substituted for “Plan B,” which is “probably” equivalent to “Plan A.” We might therefore read the two “Plans,” like the three maps, as “diagrams” of the same life—or, rather, the same “novel.”

Plan A, a chronological stratification of events through an object with clear symbolic “meaning,” represents what Lukács would call the organization of the novel’s “biographical form,” wherein a character’s life’s events become “significant landmarks along a clearly mapped road” through the “paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole.”²²¹ This schema, he argues, is the necessary recourse of the novel genre in “an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a *problem*, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”²²² Although the subjectivity produced in the novel “glimpses a unified world in the mutual relativity of elements

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, 81, 84.

²²² Ibid., 56 (my emphasis).

essentially alien to one another, and gives form to this world,” this unity is “purely formal”: “the antagonistic nature of the inner and outer worlds is not abolished but only recognised as necessary.”²²³ Lukács thus declares that while every creative form is structured constitutively by the “fundamental dissonance of existence,” only in the novel is this dissonance “*the form itself*.”²²⁴

Lukács’s *The Theory of the Novel* was originally published in 1916. Does the cultural paradigm under which today’s novels are written, one might ask, still require them to “[think] in terms of totality”? In his engagement of recent contemporary fiction in *Free Indirect*, Bewes identifies the novel’s constitutive formal dissonance—which he describes, drawing from Lukács, as its particular ability to “[hollow] out” or “deauthorize” any possible truth claim at the instant of making it, due to its inescapable fictionality—as working not to *affirm* the totality of the subject, but to *dissolve* it.²²⁵ He calls this principle the “free indirect,” after the modern novelistic invention of “free indirect discourse,” which, he argues, initiates the possibility of a logic of “thought” untethered from any identifiable subject.²²⁶ This logic, however, can be found in forms other than the novel: he locates, it, for example, in Gilles Deleuze’s theory of cinema, wherein the “‘instants’ of cinema are ‘equidistant’ from one another and from the whole; no single moment emerges to unify and explain the rest.”²²⁷ Deleuze dismantles the opposition between the “privileged instant” of the film and the “any-instance-whatever,” showing instead that “*there*

²²³ Ibid., 75.

²²⁴ Ibid., 62, 72 (my emphasis).

²²⁵ Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (Columbia: 2022), 10.

²²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²²⁷ Ibid., 210.

are no privileged instants, or, rather, that there are privileged instants only in so far as we impose ... our own cuts or disconnections, on the movement-image.”²²⁸

Perhaps, this is what the narrator of *Patio* illustrates with his description of “Plan A” followed by “Plan B”: the capacity of the novel—and, by extension, what I will call for our purposes “textuality” as such—to manifest the very *impossibility* of constructing a coherent narrative of “privileged instants” out of a life, at the same time as noting that, paradoxically, texts do it all the time. By invoking a logic of exchangeability between “identical” versions of the same novel, or life, *Patio*—just as Bewes writes of W. G. Sebald’s *Vertigo*, which also has a first-person narrator—opens up the possibility that “every entity and utterance has an ‘equal and undiminished right’ to exist because no entity or utterance is given explanatory significance over any other.”²²⁹

Lin’s narrator himself remarks, toward the end of the novel, that his father’s death was “not very traumatic in the scheme of childhood gifts, as it might be, for example, in the nineteenth-century novel.”²³⁰ Thus, Lin’s de-hierarchization of the novel “genre,” I argue, only reaffirms the same inherent ambience of textuality illustrated in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*: the formal ability to allow links between elements to continually erase and re-constitute each other indefinitely, beyond the control of any one ‘subject.’

This “universalization of the principle of free indirect discourse,” as Bewes formulates it, allows the novel to undo the “conceptual relationship in which the parts of a work are linked to a whole”—here denoting a “conceptual whole” that could include the “world of which the work is

²²⁸ Ibid., 209.

²²⁹ Ibid, 67, quoting W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo* (1999), 72-3.

²³⁰ Lin, *Patio*.

a part.”²³¹ We might infer as an example Lukács’s claim that the novel must attempt (and necessarily fail) to “posit a purely individual experience ... as the existent and constitutive meaning of reality.”²³² Bewes calls this the logic of “exemplarity,” but, for the purposes of my analysis of *Patio*, I offer as an analog the more expanded logic of the “generic”: whereby, for example, a childhood becomes one instance of “the thing known as ‘childhood,’” or Buckeye Mart and Murphy’s Mart become interchangeable instances of the “genre” known as the suburban department store because they “sold basically the same sort of things.”²³³ This is the same relation as that of the “sample,” in its broader definition as the taking of a smaller part as representative of a whole. It is also the same relation as that explored by the figure of the “logo” in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, which I analyzed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 as illustrating the ability for material objects to be read interchangeably and automatically as ‘standing in for’ a larger category or sign.

The notion of “genre,” like the logo and other “open-source reading codes” that *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* makes use of, is also predicated upon a “*fonctionnalité absent*.”²³⁴ Frow notes that the “imputations or guesses” one makes in order to identify a text as belonging to a certain genre are “grounded in the institutions in which genre has its social being: the institutions of classification in the broadest sense.”²³⁵ In *Patio*, though, as in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, any recourse to a stable idea of how these “institutions of classification” might be constructed, becomes scrambled.

²³¹ Bewes, *Free Indirect*, 39, 77.

²³² Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* 142-3.

²³³ Lin, *Patio*.

²³⁴ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 70, meaning “absent functionality.” See my analysis of this phrase at the end of Chapter 2.

²³⁵ Frow, *Genre*, 112.

Taxonomies and classification are constantly being evoked only to transform themselves, which the narrator identifies as instances of misuse and mis-identification. His father is prone to repurposing objects in the family yard, a practice the narrator describes at one point as “the misuse of metal objects with unambiguous purposes.”²³⁶ In fact, *not* so *un*-ambiguous: Pizza-making bins become birdseed-storage containers, lawn chair tubing becomes an irrigation system, and leftover stones from the demolition of a nearby bank become a patio. This transformation of objects through “misuse” is inseparable from the work of reading, or semiotic relation more broadly. For example, the narrator states that the miscellaneous objects in the yard “intersected with and were indistinguishable from the other things of the world that I was looking at and reading about,” including “Adidas shoes, a creek ... Hölderlin’s heartrending verse ... and Jonathan Edwards’s hit ‘Athens County.’” At Buckeye Mart, he buys a record called *Beatle Mania!*, which turns out not to be a “real Beatles record” but the greatest hits of Beatles cover band The Liverpools (another instance of the slippery boundary between “real” and “fake” that one might read in terms of the novel’s general problematization of the fiction/nonfiction distinction).

Furthermore, the narrator’s emphasis on these instances of “misuse” seems to be related to his father’s own “misuse” of the English language. He notes that his father’s Chinese accent and grammatical errors lent his English speech, as well as his writing, the character of “not quite [being] the things that he had chosen.” For example, he would dig up a substance from creek beds that he called “Watt clay,” but which the protagonist and his sister understood for years as the question “What clay?” The father distinguishes between “dirt” and “clay”—stating that “clay

²³⁶ Lin, *Patio*.

becomes something; dirt does not”—but uses the same word, “kaolin,” to refer to both, “probably because it was easier to pronounce correctly (in the Chinese way).”²³⁷

“In this suppressed bilingual household,” the narrator thus reflects, “my father’s words registered as *tokens* of speech rather than *types* of speech.”²³⁸ He here references the distinction in linguistics between the general (or ‘generic’) existence of a word or phrase and a particular contextual utterance of that word or phrase. Following linguistic scholars such as Yuen Ren Chao—whose work the narrator cites as the source of his own “recollection of much of [his] father’s speaking habits”²³⁹—technically, all of the father’s utterances would be tokens, rather than types, given that they appear as “actual instance[s] of occurrence in a situation.”²⁴⁰ However, the narrator’s emphasis on the token-like quality of his father’s words implies an extreme non-generalizability of any one utterance of his father’s—or, put another way, the inability to assign them to any one ‘generic’ type. He wonders, for example, whether his father’s difficulty using the word “them,” “despite ... knowing better,” was “a result of the Chinese language, where most characters are written out as a one-syllable morphemes,” or “a result of my father’s not speaking English well,” or “whether gestures are sometimes more translatable than words.”²⁴¹ His father’s language, existing in some unidentifiable place between the classificatory rules of English and those of Chinese, thus becomes one of the novel’s limit-cases for the work of the generic as such.

Paradoxically, however, this ambiguity appears at time only to reinforce the work of taxonomic categories—here, ones of race and nationality. The narrator describes believing as a

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid. (my emphasis).

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Yuen Ren Chao, *Language and Symbolic Systems* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 151.

²⁴¹ Lin, *Patio*.

child that “I was able to understand *his Chinese* perfectly—even though he was clearly and plainly talking to me in English,” noting that “[m]y father was always a Chinese-speaking person in my mind, even when we were mowing the grass together and even after I graduated from high school.” The ambiguity of his father’s language, its inability to be fully coherent within a generic system of linguistic classification, is paradoxically given up to a monolithic designation—Chinese—that comes to envelop him and differentiate him from the narrator even in the shared, non-enunciative action of mowing grass. He goes on to reflect, “It was this same feeling that made it possible for me to think that I had outgrown my father sometime in high school.”

This totalizing categorization might be read as an example of what Bewes calls “the violence of the instantiation relation,” the latter term denoting “a relation between ‘particulars’ and ‘universals,’ such that a particular entity can be said to ‘instantiate’ a universal quality.”²⁴² The violence of this relation, which appears to function similarly to that of the genre, lies in “the assumption of a nonlinguistic origin” that must necessarily be invoked in order to link a “primary, universal quality and its secondary or particular instantiation in an object.”²⁴³

Derrida makes a similar point in his essay “The Law of Genre.” In order for a work of art to be recognized as such, he argues, a genre “code” must provide “an identifiable trait and one which is identical to itself, authorizing us to determine, to adjudicate whether a given text *belongs*.”²⁴⁴ This trait, the “mark of belonging or inclusion,” however, “does not properly pertain to any genre” itself.²⁴⁵ The designation “novel” on a book, for example, does not belong to the set of “novelistic” attributes of the text—indeed, in order to function, it *cannot* belong to the

²⁴² Bewes, *Free Indirect*, 219, 85.

²⁴³ Ibid., 219-220.

²⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” *Glyph* 7 (Spring 1980), 64 (my emphasis).

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 65.

‘fictional’ content of the work. However, this trait is simultaneously not fully exterior to the text; it functions as supplementary paratext or *parergon*, for without it, the text would not exist as such: the novel could not ‘be,’ or ‘be read as,’ a novel. The notion of “genre” is thus predicated upon a paradoxical and constitutive *absence* in the very relation that holds it together.

Derrida relates what he calls the “law of genre”—that every text *must* have some genre, based on some genre-distinctive trait—to the function of the “law” in general. Playing on the double meaning of *genre* in French (meaning both “genre” and “gender”), Derrida identifies this same supplemental relation as upholding the “law” of sexual difference, of “a *relationless* relation between the two, of an identity and difference between the feminine and masculine.”²⁴⁶

In *Patio*, the ideological implications of the “law of genre” manifest in the narrator’s use of the markers “Chinese” and “American,” which sometimes seem to indicate an ambient circulation of racially discriminatory ideology in the U.S. The “genre” of “Chinese” appears to pervade every aspect of the protagonist’s parents’ existence—paradoxically, even as they attempt to acquire “American”-ness. Reflecting upon his father’s habit of repurposing broken or unused items, the narrator reflects that “all these items looked like the remains of some lost history that had washed up in Appalachia and was stamped MADE IN CHINA. I suppose this is why my father made everything he touched Chinese, even when he was cooking on a barbecue.”²⁴⁷ The narrator even describes his own “childhood’s childhood,” at the beginning of the novel, as a “Chinese childhood encased inside a Western one,” again invoking a sort of immortal “Chinese”-ness that—like a genre designation—is the only self-same thing guaranteeing its own existence,

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 74 (my emphasis). I do not have space for it here, as psychoanalysis is not the primary critical lens of this thesis, but a longer encounter with this quotation of Derrida’s would wish to read it alongside Jacques Lacan’s famous statement “*il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*” (“There is no sexual relation”), as discussed by Jean-Luc Nancy and Alenka Zupančič.

²⁴⁷ Lin, *Patio*.

even though it itself cannot exist without a set of objects to latch onto. Of course, his father *was* actually from China, but the characterization that he also “made everything he touched Chinese” might thus be read as “the assumption of a nonlinguistic origin” to a linguistic marker, present also in the narrator’s adolescent identification of his father as a “Chinese-speaking person” even when speaking English—even when, as when mowing grass together, he did not speak at all. Looking back at the combination of the otherwise apparently unrelated ‘family photos’ and Boys’ Shop catalog discussed previously, this racializing connective logic might also be at work, implicitly, in their mutual inclusion of figures who appear to be of East Asian descent (see fig. 4).

Lin’s treatment of race in *Patio*, however, is not reducible to a clear-cut imposition of racial ideology from some external, all-powerful figure of ‘American culture.’ For, the term “American” also proliferates throughout the text, and neither the marker “American” nor “Chinese” is given a stable position with regard to the objects or people it designates. The narrator reflects that both “cooking and shopping,” although “inversely proportional skills” over time in the generations of the protagonist’s family, “were all part of the same *system*, which in this case was not really a family so much as *the vaguely Asian moods a family might have in Athens, Ohio.*”²⁴⁸ By rendering Asianness as a vague “mood,” he thus opens up the possibility that genres are not distinct concepts instantiated in specific objects, but a more slippery, ambient, relational processes:

My father, who came from Fukien, loved to shop as an adult, in Ohio! Especially in big, warehouse-style stores and for things that were on sale! And in that way he was the most American person I’ve ever known except for myself. My mother was a Shanghainese

²⁴⁸ Ibid. (my emphasis).

woman who loved shopping! Especially for things on sale! And in that way she was the most Chinese person I've ever known except for myself.²⁴⁹

Here, I draw from Derrida's analysis of the formulation "*beings* ... usually women, beautiful creatures" in Maurice Blanchot's *La folie du jour*, in which he reads the "usually" as an indication of the "relationless relation" between "*genres*" ("genders") that supposedly exist in binary opposition: the "usually," however, is a mark of *contingency*, "a mark of ... this *coupling* that is also perhaps a *mixing* of genres."²⁵⁰ With this "usually," Blanchot opens up the possibility that "[t]he genres *pass into each other*," a de-essentializing of sexual difference that, Derrida notes, "may bear some relation to the mixing of literary genres."²⁵¹ In other words, the implicit *absence* of any "linguistic origin" that constitutes the link between a particular and its corollary universal attribute in the genre, or "instantiation," relation is *at the same time* that which allows this relation to become confused, to dissolve itself. In this passage from *Patio*, there appears to be no identifiable difference between the two descriptions of shopping that allow the narrator to designate his father "American" and his mother "Shanghainese": the two signs thus "pass into each other." Furthermore, the 'generic' unit of comparison—the narrator himself—is simultaneously the "most American person" and "most Chinese person" he has ever known. In rendering the two terms interchangeable, the passage thus lays bare the "*fonctionnalité absent*" that both sustains and destroys the essentialist logic of the law of genre. As Bewes writes of Sebald's novels, "the forging of the link" between two signifiers in *Patio* is at the same time

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 76 (my emphasis).

²⁵¹ Ibid. (my emphasis).

“*dependent* upon its absence”: “Meanings are made, they *take place*, but *meanings, too, are objects perceived*”—offered up to the ambience of textuality.²⁵²

I do not wish to neutralize the significance Lin lends in *Patio* to the material violence of the generalizing logic of racialization. The narrator notes in passing, for example, that his father's language was always “mixed up with the familiar, bilingual meanings of other things, like *patios* and *weekends* and *four-o'clock tea* ... and like the racial discrimination that marked his and my mother's first years in America.”²⁵³ As Derrida notes of the law of genre, and as Bewes notes of the instantiation relation, the constructedness and artificiality of taxonomic categorization—one could say its “non-existence,” seeing as it is founded upon an *absence*—does not mean it does not have material effects. This can be seen also, for example, in the “hypotyposis” of the “Mobile Optical Semiotic Surface” I analyzed in the poem “MOSS” (and “MOLD”) in the last chapter, where semiotic structure is revealed as implicated even in non-conscious perceptual phenomena—and might also be seen, in a different way, in my investigation of the imbrication of textuality and ecological “life” in *Patio* in the next chapter.

However, the *ambient* nature of structures of signification—their ability to function, systematically, below conscious interpretation and without the autonomous control of the individual—is also their inherent relationality, and thus their *contingency*. In the paragraph following the narrator's reflection on “types” and “tokens” of speech, he states, “In regard to tokens, the good thing about a box of chocolates on Valentine's Day is that the box says something you do not have to, and the good thing about a token is that buses take them. The bad thing is that a token can be wrong.”

²⁵² Bewes, *Free Indirect*, 66, 67 (my emphasis).

²⁵³ Lin, *Patio*.

One might read the curious reference to “a box of chocolates” as an explanation of the logic of the token-type relationship: just as “the box says something you do not have to,” the token, or individual utterance, can only function by relating, *implicitly*, to a type, a vague ‘general usage’ that is left *unspoken*. There is, however, no guarantee that this general meaning is at all stable: a “token” is also something that “buses take,” and it can also “be wrong.” In his review of *Patio* in the online publication *Full Stop*, Peter Nowogrodzki describes this use of antanacsis, the rhetorical use of the repetition of the same word with a different sense, as a move whereby “[t]oken-ness is simultaneously affirmed and undermined.”²⁵⁴ By rendering blurry the boundaries between these many, potentially infinite oscillating meanings, the passage both makes use of and subverts the logic of the generic—exposing, in other words, the inherent *lack* of self-sameness of every sign.

Nowogrodzki points out that this proliferation of potential relations between a single signifier and multiple signifieds is also reversed: over the course of *Patio*, the narrator increasingly seems to use different words interchangeably, including “father,” “patio,” and “death”—as though they were themselves all tokens referring to some common unknown “type.” In the next chapter, I take a closer look at how material transformations in the novel are inextricable from their discursive relations, forming an ecological system whereby organic and signifying processes are rendered as co-constituting in a kind of general ecology of life and death, or the continual reconstitution of relation based on a “*fonctionnalité absent*.”

²⁵⁴ Peter Nowogrodzki, “Inalienable Resurrection: Tan Lin’s *The Patio and the Index*,” *Full Stop* (2012), accessed April 7, 2024, <https://www.full-stop.net/2012/07/09/features/essays/peter-nowogrodzki/inalienable-resurrection-tan-lins-the-patio-and-the-index/>.

4. ECOLOGY, ABSENCE, LIFE, DEATH, PATIO

In the last chapter, I argued that Lin's *The Patio and the Index* employs a de-hierarchization of substitutable forms and signs to subvert the logic of bounded "subjectivity" that the first-person novel 'genre' might initially appear to lend it. Furthermore, it exposes the fundamental ambiguity of "genre" itself—used here to denote the taxonomic relation of a part to a conceptual whole—due to its predication on a supplementary *absence* that functions simultaneously as its condition of possibility and its indefinite mutability. The endless, systemic nature of the structure of signification as an "ambience" is thus shown to be predicated upon the functioning of a certain opening for contingency: a lack of definable origin or end, or a "*fonctionnalité absent*."

In this final chapter, I investigate the way in which *Patio* figures "ambient textuality" as a structure within which to explore the co-implication of various systems of "being" as a fundamentally ecological relation, removing the opposition between biological and discursive conceptions of natural life. The "absent functionality" of signification, which I analyze through the figures of "desire" and "death" in the text, emerges once again as that which allows the constitution of this relation between processes of being.

While I spent some time in the last chapter examining the way in which concepts such as "family" and "childhood" in *Patio* are illustrated as inextricable from the structures of American capitalism and cultural ideology within which they operate, the novel also deals considerably with a proliferation of other systemic processes, one of which is that of nonhuman organic life. At one point, *Patio*'s narrator describes his father's construction projects, whereby he transforms

broken objects to give them a new purpose, as functioning “in the same way that Marcel Duchamp once took a used bicycle wheel and made it into something that it wasn’t but in fact was.”²⁵⁵ Just as the material object of the bicycle wheel cannot be separated from its endless discursive (re)production, so organic processes in *Patio* are in constant play with textual ones.

In Chapter 4, before describing the “summer of 1978,” or “patio” (recall that these two terms are interchangeable, as I noted in the last chapter), the narrator reflects upon his father’s practice of “continually transplanting moss, trilliums, and what I later learned was an extremely rare variety of light green Appalachian fern, *Trichomanes intricatum*,” from the woods to “various borders” and “moss and fern beds” around the yard.²⁵⁶ He and his father “usually found the fern[s] on, and sometimes around, rocks in sheltered crevices and grottoes ... between rocks, and sometimes clinging to trees,” from which they would transplant them into their garden. This process is described in a passage that has appeared in my thesis twice before, but which I will quote again (for the last time) here:

They, along with the moss that we also liked to transplant, reminded my father and me of a blanket made by nature and came to stand in my mind for the wall-to-wall carpeting in our house, and so, in a sense, the woods for me were always carpeted just as our house was, and the life of the woods around our house was in a continual cycle of self-domestication and perpetual greening, which I associated with reading and families. Reading repaired something like nature or our house, and nature, like our family memories, was carpeted like a piece of handiwork.²⁵⁷

As I argued in Chapter 1, this passage illustrates an experience of signification as metaphor, materialized in the narrator’s immediate surroundings. The woods and the house

²⁵⁵ Lin, *Patio* (unpaginated).

²⁵⁶ Lin, *Patio*.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

become substitutes for each other due to their shared attributes, through a process of reading by which “nature,” “our house,” and “families,” or “our family memories,” are “repaired” and repair themselves. Reading thus allows for the recognition of the relational constitution of an environment through shared *processes*, rather than a unity based on essential static attributes.

Earlier in the passage, the narrator reflects that his father may have been interested in ferns “because, like ceramics, they seemed to have spent some time in Asia,” as well as “because they had spent considerable time as pictures on all manner of useful objects in the late nineteenth century, where the then-gothic look of a fern could be found on wallpaper, gauze curtains, bedspreads,” and so on. Crucially, in this passage, an *image* of a fern in a wallpaper pattern is no less a “fern” than the biologically reproducing plants in the protagonist’s garden, nor the generalized concept (we might, with regard to the last chapter, say the “genre” or “type”) of the fern as a scientific object with a broader, global genealogical ‘history.’ The formulation that ferns are not only to be found in the garden, but have “spent considerable time as pictures” as well as “some time in Asia” thus undoes the distinction between the mimetic *representation* of a thing, its use as an abstract discursive *concept*, and the ‘thing itself’: these three instances of “fern” are functionally interchangeable, for they can be *read* as the same *sign*. We might here recall, from Chapter 2, Ernst Gombrich’s argument against the mimetic definition of representation in images, which instead characterizes representation as the ability “to ‘stand for, be specimen of, fill place of, be substitute for.’”²⁵⁸ The success or failure of such a substitution, he notes, is dependent upon each new encounter between an artwork and a spectator, requiring a certain “automatic recognition” on the part of the latter.²⁵⁹ Re-reading this argument after our encounter

²⁵⁸ Gombrich, “Meditations on a Hobby Horse,” 209.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 216.

with genre in the last chapter, we might note the resonance with Frow's notion of genre as a "systemic" construction that takes place "between texts and readers"²⁶⁰: indeed, even Gombrich's formulation "be specimen of" recalls a generic, even scientific, relation between particular and universal, "token" and "type."

In this passage, "fern-ness" appears to function not through biological composition, but through a certain discursive relation that appears untraceable to any identifiable origin point other than the circulation of the sign "fern" itself. Directly following the description of reading quoted earlier, the narrator remarks, "of course, the fern has been published. Here is a listing in the *American Fern Journal*," accompanied by a screenshot of the database entry of the specimen listing on Tropicos.com. This entry, he notes, "suggests how a particular specimen is local to a particular area ... but also bears a family resemblance to Andean and Ecuadorian varieties." He then reflects, "Like everything else, a fern has a publication history, and its pictures propagate throughout the world."²⁶¹

The narrator thus renders the *biological* reproduction of the fern *through its discursive reproduction*: the fern can just as easily be thought of via its "family resemblance" to species on the other side of the world, or through its "proliferation" on patterned objects, as it can be thought of as biologically linked to a certain place—and all of these 'reproductive' relations are linked to a kind of reading. Following his speculation of his father's interest in ferns' "time in Asia," he notes that the Appalachian *Trichomanes intricatum* they would dig up together is actually "indigenous not to Asia but to southeastern Ohio." However, even as it is characterized as originating in a certain place, the fern-as-biological-organism still undergoes continual

²⁶⁰ Frow, *Genre*, 111.

²⁶¹ Lin, *Patio*.

transplantation, or ‘translation,’ just like the fern-as-sign does. It simply happens at a smaller scale: “from the wild woods surrounding our house to the only slightly less wild gardens and border areas around our patio.”

This passage removes the ontological primacy of an essential biological *origin* to the fern, illuminating, rather, its inscription within various imbricated processes that come together discursively. This contingency is also applicable to other symbolic markers; for example, the reference to the fern’s Asianness calls to mind the protagonist’s earlier reflections on his parents’ own ‘translation’ from China to America, and their own “Chinese”-ness, which seemed to slip into “American”-ness and back again at different moments. Perhaps, this discussion of the fern can offer a more nuanced reading of the *gen-*, Latin for “birth” or “origin,” that links the “genre” discussed in the last chapter to the biological term “genus.” Objects in a certain genre or genus are named thus because they are thought to have the same origin. But, what if there is no specifiable origin ‘point’? The mechanism that allows one object to be identified with another, or as belonging to a certain category, is reading. And reading is an ongoing *process* without discrete origin or end, for it is predicated always upon a relation. It simply makes distinctions and equivalences, joins and separates; it allows for a childhood home to become an ecosystem in which “a summer garden in the woods,” or, alternatively, “a disguised spring garden that looked like a kind of moss-lined living room,” were “liable to pop up” at any time, producing a “continually shifting border between a small house and the Ohio woods that constantly seemed to be erasing or crossing into it.”²⁶² “A garden is just a garden inside another kind of garden,” the narrator remarks. The functional distinction between the backyard property of the house and the

²⁶² Ibid.

surrounding woods is, after all, a discursive one, always constituting itself in relation to the material processes that occur on its borders.

In the complex passage that follows, Lin's use of metaphor and near-axiomatic statements places in relation most of the systematic processes this thesis has discussed so far, including the artistic, the mechanical, the biological, and, of course, the textual:

Although I did not realize it then, everything my father did in this period involved a seasonal camouflaging, the extension of a process I associated with painting or black-and-white photography, or the migration of one species of plant or demolished object to another place. Although this occurred, technically speaking, within the Athens city limits ... this vast, ongoing horticultural, academic, home-improvement, mildly photographic, heavily read and annotated engineering project is what I associate in my mind with what most people refer to as nature but what in our family was a kind of machine-made migration of the genealogy of a living room into the world at large. A living room is anything one lives in. A family is the living room one lives in for a while and then walks away from. Like the description of woods in a book, it is surrounded by marginalia. And until I witnessed my father's building projects, which were really like books, I did not really understand that a living room or a cistern could have a genealogy or an efflores[c]ence in the same way people or a vending machine could.²⁶³

In an effort to tease out these connections, I will try to trace the relations at work in this passage's transformations and substitutions. The father's building and gardening projects are framed as an "extension" of the process of artistic production, which is aligned with the "migration" of an object (biological or non-biological) from one place to another—a process which could just as well describe the circulation of text via citation, or "sampling," as the geographical spread of a plant species or the refashioning of a broken item. In fact, all of these processes can describe one and the same thing: a "vast, ongoing horticultural, academic, home-improvement, mildly photographic, heavily read and annotated engineering project." Once again,

²⁶³ Ibid.

the signifiers of different systematic practices—gardening, photography, reading, writing—are all used as descriptors of the same “engineering project,” and thus become part of a new system of interrelated terms.

This expanded aggregation of operations is identified with “a kind of machine-made migration of the genealogy of a living room into the world at large”—or, “what most people refer to as nature.” The static signifier “nature” is thus replaced with the description of a process that combines the organic and the discursive—through the reference to “genealogy,” itself a *symbolic* structure used to give discrete form to the process of evolution—as well as the technical or automatic (“machine-made”). Furthermore, the passage rejects the opposition between “nature” and “culture” with its definition of “living room” as “anything one lives in,” which could, of course, refer to not only a house, but also a garden, or woods, or “what most people refer to as nature.” If “[a] family is the living room one lives in for a while and then walks away from,” then, following the transitive law, “family” can also be defined simply as another “[‘thing one lives in’] for a while and then walks away from.” And a living room, or thing one lives in, or ecological system, is also a form of textuality: “Like the description of woods in a book,” a family—which might also be called a “living room,” or “nature”—“is surrounded by marginalia.”

Finally, the narrator reflects that his father’s “building projects ... were really like books.” Although he does not elaborate on this claim, I would venture that his father’s projects operated in the same way writing or reading does because both processes exchange the identities of objects and/or transplant them elsewhere, thereby inscribing them within new structures of signification and lending them new functions. This understanding leads the narrator to the

realization that “a living room or a cistern could have a genealogy or an efflores[c]ence in the same way people or a vending machine could.” Human genetics are traceable, producing a genealogy. A vending machine might be understood to have “efflorescence,” like “people” or plants do, if “efflorescence” is ‘read’ as the delivery of objects of a certain category out of itself. The *textuality* of his father’s building projects, which extends the transformative play of signs to the entire ecosystem of the narrator’s childhood, or of Athens, Ohio, also extends to all of the objects within this world a kind of relational, ecological existence, which reaches into the past as into the future. A living room or a cistern became, through *reading*, participants in living processes.

At the same time, the manifestation of reading-writing in the production of discrete textual objects—for example, “an elevated birdbath built out of an old pot and excess plumbing pipe”—can never fully resolve the fundamental incompleteness implied by a *process* that has no discrete origin or end. The passage continues:

Or in other words, there was no distinction between a desire born indoors in people and a desire born outside in nature. But there is no such thing as desire either, as my father understood; there are only ways of making desires out of the objects they lose track of.

Like most things that we never stop thinking about, these projects were unplanned, out of my father’s desires that eventually became vestigially connected to my own. We did not need bridges to cross the creeks since we could jump them. We did not need a one-foot-deep flooded pool created on a rainy weekend by a dam. Building things, for my father, was simpler and more radical: It involved making an opportunity, like winning the lottery or appearing in the newspaper, materialize in only one place in the world. Such an opportunity, regarded as a fortuitous corruption of resources, had to be grabbed before its future vanished or, to be more precise, before it vanished and took away my father’s time with it.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Here, the continual *absence* that allows links of signification to both construct and erase themselves is also at work in the narrator's reflections upon his father's *desire*. The father's proclivity for building things in the world, toward sampling, transforming, and reinscribing them, which was also a kind of writing, is framed as co-constitutive with his desires: the projects were planned "out of my father's desires," but such desires are, conversely, also *produced* "out of the objects they lose track of." Here, desire is not a thing that exists in the world—"there is no such thing as desire"—but an eternal non-thing, an *absence* that replaces something continually deferred. The protagonist thus portrays his father's building projects as attempts to grasp, to make-present, desire's continual promise, which could also be called "opportunity": to have it "grabbed before its future vanished" by "materializ[ing]" it in the bounds of a static object, "in only one place in the world." Absence, figured here as desire, is an indefinite deferral of the making-present that works non-consciously—"out of the objects [it] lose[s] track of"—as well as outside the bounds of the individual subject: "my father's desires ... eventually became vestigially connected to my own." In other words, it is *ambient*.

Derrida mentions in *Of Grammatology* that the concept of supplementarity, whose "place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness," describes not only the "*structure of substitution*" of the textual chain, but also the "*articulation of desire*."²⁶⁵ "Desire" here is figured through the structure of writing—in other words, it is a desire for presence, a presence which is constantly deferred through the endless substitution of signs. This desire is predicated upon "the structural necessity of an abyss," for "the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already made a break within presence."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 157, 177.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 177.

Faithful representation fails; it is always already inscribed within an “indefinite process,” always *en abyme*. In *Patio*, thus, when the narrator states that “[a] garden is just a garden inside another kind of garden,” he is illustrating simultaneously the material porousness between the backyard and the woods surrounding it and their inscription within the endless chain of substitutions of reading and writing, whereby they can be made to *function* the same way. That this system has no origin and is never reducible to any single static object is what manifests as the father’s desire, and perpetuates his process of materializing it, or failing to materialize it, in his transformation of things in the world.

The protagonist states in Chapter 2,

When my father lugged a new thing home, my sister and I would try to figure out what thing it resembled and what it might be used for—and thus transformed into “the thing whose purpose we could not calculate.” And in that way, I learned something about the infrastructure of small-scale farming and desire in Appalachia, and that the former, like the latter, is pretty much indifferent to the thing (the one thing) one really desires.²⁶⁷

Here, the guessing game—a kind of reading—that occurs between the father and his children is reformulated in terms of the “infrastructure” of desire; an unspecific, abstract desire not ascribed to any one person. Instead, desire is aligned with the game’s production of “the thing whose purpose we could not calculate”—a failure to identify the resemblance to an object whose function might be familiar to them. It is easy to misread this sentence with a hallucinated “it”; i.e., “my sister and I ... transformed *it*”—referring to the “new thing”—into “the thing whose purpose we could not calculate.” Because the “it” is missing, however, the phrase implies that it is not the “new thing” that becomes incalculable due to the failure of metaphorical resemblance,

²⁶⁷ Lin, *Patio*.

but “my sister and I.” The subjects and objects of reading become confused through the operation of a diffuse, impersonal desire. In *Patio*, thus, desire—as opposed to “happiness” or “unhappiness,” which the protagonist at one point states are “in my mind ... the same”—is articulated as one instantiation of the continual, constitutive *impossibility* of reading to become discrete and graspable; a failure of substitution to fully ‘account for’ a given object.

Part of the incalculability of the father’s objects is his own resistance to participate in the guessing game, evidenced by only moment of dialogue in the entire novel, which occurs during this ‘scene’ between the protagonist and/or his sister (this is left unspecified) and the father: “What’s that?” “It’s from a pizza parlor.” “What is it?” “It’s from a pizza parlor.” “But what is it for?” “It’s for pizza.” A little later: “How is it for pizza?” “I don’t know.” “Are we going to make pizza?” “No.”

The narrator notes that because of this failure of communication, “everything was frustrating to the imaginations we were trying to attach to the things our father brought home.” The father’s lack of an answer to their questions engenders the failure of successful metaphorical resemblance. The protagonist remarks that his father was “a taciturn and moody man every time the subject of a question even came up,” and that he does not know why his father was never able to answer them—perhaps because of his “chronic depression or a melancholia that resembled or resisted our sense of impatience, and that later became the edges of our own impatience.” Here, “resembling” and “resisting” are not opposing terms, but can exist together as functions of one and the same process whereby the direct, identificatory link between signifier and signified is continuously impeded. The narrator goes on:

I do not know if it was simply too difficult for my father to think in English when I asked him a question, whether he was stubborn and didn't want us to figure out what he was thinking, or whether when confronted with the stubbornness of the things of this world he would just dig in his heels and act like nothing was happening.²⁶⁸

The failure of language here is thus not reducible to the language barrier between father and son; or, rather, the fact of the language barrier cannot be separated from the father's depressive stubbornness, and, conversely, the "stubbornness of the things of this world."

Although this may appear counterintuitive, my discussion of the figure of "desire" with regard to the father is not meant to imply a strictly psychoanalytic reading.²⁶⁹ Recall that the protagonist's discussion of desire quoted a few pages ago begins, "For there was no distinction between a desire born indoors in people and a desire born outside in nature." As I have shown, the text continually problematizes the notion of "nature" as a static concept; however, if there is such a thing as a desire *not* born in "people," then "desire" is not a concept exclusive to the human unconscious. Conversely, though, I would also resist claiming that the text here goes so far as to assert a kind of 'subjectivity' to things that are not people. Michael Marder, for example, formulates a "plant desire" in his book *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013); a "vegetal capacity for nourishment" he calls "nutritive desire"—to which, he notes, "[humans] are also privy whenever we are hungry or thirsty."²⁷⁰ *Patio*, though, makes no such explicit claims to the "intentionality" of nonhuman beings.²⁷¹ Rather, the novel emphasizes the inseparability of human and nonhuman processes through the metaphorical constitution of writing. My figuring of textuality here as a kind of 'living' process is not meant to unilaterally replace or incorporate all

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Not to say that such a reading of *Patio* would necessarily be false—Lacan's emphasis on language in subject-formation is certainly resonant with many of the structural claims I make in this thesis.

²⁷⁰ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 39.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 152.

other ways of conceiving “being” into the single system of “writing,” but is rather meant to show how semiotic relations emerge as a method of conceiving of the potential interrelatedness of all systems that does not oppose the material to the differential. As I hope I have made clear, I believe that Lin’s work demands a focus on interrelated *systems* and *structures* and a de-emphasis of the analysis of discrete *objects* and *subjects*. Importantly, this does not mean that I disavow subject-formation as a material process—discourse is always, continually producing subjects (subjects of ideology, for example, as I tried to show in the last chapter)—but rather that Lin’s texts perform the inextricable link between metaphor and materiality by placing their subjects secondary to the signifying processes that are always liable to constitute and re-constitute them.

As such, “desire” is not an interpretive ‘key’ to the text, but one of many (potentially infinite) ways the fact of the processual nature of absence and incompleteness is rendered. Another such term is “death.” To conclude this final chapter, I will read the end of *Patio*, which concerns the construction of the patio, or “summer of 1978,” itself. I hope to tease out through this reading how the work allows for the interweaving and co-constitution of the various processes I have touched on in this thesis so far through the metaphor of absence, figured here as “death.”

The narrator recounts that during the summer between high school and college, his father decided to construct a patio out of free discarded limestone slabs from a demolished bank in a neighboring town. The stones, which were dropped off in four giant piles around the family property, “transformed our yard and all the grounds around into a quarry made from the remains

of a defunct bank in Nelsonville.”²⁷² These rock piles created a new ecosystem out of the one they replaced, serving as a play structure places for the protagonist and his sister and as “a breeding ground for snakes, whose soft white eggs we often uncovered.” The patio, which was built over the course of “nearly five or six months,” was, similarly, the product of an ecological, textual, systemic process rather than a discrete actor or number of actors. For example, it involved the labor of the narrator’s “father, mother, sister, and me, in addition to two or three of my father’s ceramics graduate students”; but other things the building of the patio included were “a local newspaper, the *Athens Messenger*, and the classified section”; “the rerouting of the Hocking River bed, the widening of US Route 33 into a four-lane highway, and the bypassing of a few small cities such as Nelsonville, the Plains, and Logan, Ohio”; the going-defunct of several surrounding small towns and their replacement with “malls with large parking lots in front of them”; “a child’s and a larger adult’s shovel, one wheelbarrow for the mixing of the mortar, a soft-headed mallet used to hammer stones into place, one trowel, two or three pairs of heavy-duty gloves” and other tools; “marshmallows”; and “Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, which my father’s students drank in large quantities, along with my father” (“When anyone asked my father who built the patio, my father always replied, ‘Beer.’”²⁷³). The building of the patio was thus, as noted in Chapter 3, also the building of an entire summer, not only of the narrator’s life, but also his family’s, and that of the surrounding area.

This process was a technical one, in the form-giving sense of *tekhnē*: one of writing, involving a preliminary “drawing, a kind of storyboard” that consisted of numbered sheets of

²⁷² Lin, *Patio*.

²⁷³ Ibid. The word “Beer” is a broken hyperlink that leads to a now-defunct webpage of the beer manufacturer Kerr : <http://www.kerrcompanies.com/index.php?section=108> .

paper onto which individual stones were placed and which “was used to line up most of the stones in a bed of sand”; and one of art, an extension of his father’s ceramics practice—according to his father, the limestone “was itself baked in a kiln,” and it had the same texture of his father’s clay, “making me think that the patio was a kind of very slow-drying pottery made to cure on a bed of sand.” However, the patio was also itself a *living* system. The stones were made to hold together with a makeshift mortar which “paradoxically ... did not seem to dry out” but could be “watere[ed] down and stir[red] up again,” even after weeks. This characteristic leads the narrator to call it “living mortar”; the father remarks that “the mortar holding the perimeter of the patio together could breathe,” and that the patio was perpetually “self-finishing and unfinished.” He would throw unused mortar “into the transplanted fern beds on the edge of our yard, where he said it would dissolve, like lime and salt, into the plants and make the ferns greener in the spring.”

Because of its production of and interaction with a living environment(s), the narrator remarks, “In my mind, the folklore of a patio, the ecosystem of lime in a wheelbarrow and a patio that could breathe, was no different from any living thing.” And this living thing involved

a constantly moving shape that I associate with either the vagueness or triviality of time itself. And by time, I suppose I mean death. People think that time, or perhaps language, makes a patio, but it is really the other way around, and what a patio reinstates inside a life is a kind of vagueness of life itself, or perhaps its future, like a person writing him- or herself notes to be read at a later time. What you are reading is really a patio that is vaguely like me, or maybe like my death.²⁷⁴

In this passage, a patio, which is a living process of organic and inorganic objects, is also a form of textuality, “like a person writing him- or herself notes” for the future. It is also the text,

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

Patio, itself: “[w]hat you are reading,” which is “really a patio,” which resembles “my death.”

The production of life and the production of writing (and, by extension, reading) are thus inseparable processes, revolving around, or with, or through, a “constantly moving shape” that might be time, but which is also death, and which operates both as future and as past. Death is a form of absence, like desire. And “time,” or “death,” or “future,” can also be formulated as the “vagueness of life itself”: the narrator remarks that “[t]he sources of one’s happiness are always unverifiable,” and “[a] patio, like the feelings inside our feelings, is mostly indeterminate in relation to our psychic life.” This “vagueness” also manifests in the non-specificity of Lin’s language, whereby the relation between signs like “time,” “death,” “future,” and “desire” appears as eternally subject to change. Reading, both our reading and the reading illustrated by the text, is thus the continual operation of “the thing whose purpose we could not calculate”—a “*fonctionnalité absent*”—that incompleteness, absence, and indeterminacy that never stops producing objects, feelings, childhoods, families.

As I argued in Chapter 3, the novel offers a proliferation of possible forms of structuring its own narrative ‘content.’ All of these forms, including both “Plan A” as well as “Plan B”—including even its various maps—might also be reflexively applied to the story as reading methods. This story was written after the narrator’s father’s death, which might be, in a “Plan A” reading, the ‘event’ which the entire novel—and the patio itself, as a “diagram” of the novel—revolves around. But, as I noted in Chapter 3, although this death is everywhere in the novel, it is *not* described as a discrete, singularly meaningful event. The narrator reflects,

What is the difference between a patio and the memory of a human being? In childhood, there is no difference at all. For this reason, my father’s death does not occur in

sequential order, and it is not very traumatic in the scheme of childhood gifts, as it might be, for example, in the nineteenth-century novel. His death appears in any order, and it is unexpected in the context of a few other things. It is like a series of variable objects, or the idea of modernity in a book, or a store like Buckeye Mart.²⁷⁵

The patio had a de-hierarchized system of production and kept becoming-itself, perpetually, even after it had been built, and as it is here built again as the novel entitled *Patio*. Similarly, the death of the protagonist's father is not a unique "traumatic" event, as it would be "in the nineteenth-century novel." Instead, it "appears in any order," a formulation itself marked by "a kind of vagueness." Furthermore, it is not clear that this "death" demarcates an 'event' more 'real' or graspable than any other sign, for its form morphs, ambiently, to resemble also "a series of variable objects, or the idea of modernity in a book, or a store like Buckeye Mart." This last formulation makes evident that the form of "death," like the patio, like the novel, can be "diagrammed" in potentially infinite equivalent ways.

"My father's death," the narrator writes, "is mild and mildly episodic, which is the way a death inside a life might be." It is unclear to whom this "life" this refers to—literally, of course, the father's death occurs 'inside' the protagonist's life, but "a" renders it unspecific. At the same time, the narrator writes, "it is not a patio that enters a life, it is that a life intrudes on and then drops out of a patio." Recall that "patio" might also be replaced by "[w]hat you are reading," or something "like my death." Death is thus inscribed both interior *and* exterior to life, and a structure of both *temporality* (in the first formulation) and *spatiality* (in the second). It might also be related to the reproductive process of the fern, wherein, the narrator notes, "half of the parent gene pool will have expired by the time the fern takes form."²⁷⁶ Life and death are co-

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

constituting, and the process is not teleological; like “absence” and “presence,” they are not opposing terms. As Derrida notes, “death, which is neither a future present nor a past present, works the inside of speech, as its trace, its reserve, its interior and exterior difference: as its *supplement*.”²⁷⁷ “Différance,” writes Derrida, is a temporal *deferring* and a spatial *differing*, “the movement according to which language, or any code, or any system of referral in general,” comes into being as a “weave of differences.”²⁷⁸

Relation of any kind is predicated upon a temporal-spatial difference that is not static, but continually reconstituting itself; and which is not essential, but simply that which allows for the world to continually come into being. “A family,” the narrator states near the beginning of *Patio*, “is an activity and a condition, and in our case, ‘family’ was an activity with clay, which is to say we hardly thought of clay on a day-to-day basis, or as a *rite de passage*.”²⁷⁹ Clay is constitutive to the notion of “family,” and the narrator’s specific family condition, not despite, but *because of* its ambience, its ability exist on the borders of attention instead of as a “rite of passage” which would cleave “family” into some discrete relation of “before” and “after.” And, this ambient relation takes shape as a contingent and mutable “weave of differences”: “our family was *distinctive* and *conjunctive* in relation to clay.”²⁸⁰

In *Patio*, textuality as ambient process does not constitute death as the achievement of a final unity, but as always already implicated in the ongoing, endlessly repeating and differing process of signification. Like the “music of Creedence Clearwater Revival that we played in the living room,” which filtered through the “long, rectangular door like windows” outside to where

²⁷⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 343 (my emphasis).

²⁷⁸ Derrida, “Différance,” 12. The term is sometimes written with, sometimes without an accent over the “e.”

²⁷⁹ Lin, *Patio*.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. (my emphasis).

“the grad students ... were building the patio,” reading “intrudes on” and then “drops out” of other structures in “a state of incompleteness or blurriness, inside something possibly indifferent, like a structural event or a very general description of the world or my father’s depression.”²⁸¹

As I shift toward the conclusion of this thesis, I would like to end this chapter with a statement by Lin in a 2010 interview:

[*Seven Controlled Vocabularies*] is a cross-pollinated ecosystem ... It reminds me of pots my father used to make in his studio. It is a classic example of a book that gets revised by the lives that are, in turn, revised around and by it ... I have told this story at greater length and probably with somewhat more remorse in *Our Feelings Were Made by Hand*²⁸², but it might just as easily [have] been included as the postface [to *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*]! There is no real distinction between what I am writing now and what I will be writing next. This interview is the apparatus of a novel which will appear ‘shortly.’²⁸³

²⁸¹ Lin, *Patio*.

²⁸² The title of the forthcoming novel from which *Patio* is an excerpt.

²⁸³ Lin, “Tan Lin by Katherine Elaine Sanders.”

CONCLUSION

A critical reading of a text is impossible without making choices, which are elisions as much as they are inclusions. With the work of Tan Lin, especially, critically presenting a grouping and separation of textual elements is difficult. As I noted near the beginning of this thesis, his style incorporates contradiction as a fundamental stylistic mechanism: or, we might now say, the dissolution of “contradiction”—in the sense of static, reciprocal logical opposition—as a valid signifying relation as such. The constantly hovering possibility that any sign might be exchanged for another, including its ‘opposite,’ looms over any critical reading, threatening to engulf any formal or structural analysis in a privileging of universal sameness. To give an example:

...now that a little time has passed, there is not much difference between a patio and a family, or between a plumbing system, a box of Rice-A-Roni, and a book about trout fishing. Everyone tells you that one thing is one thing and another thing is a different thing at a different time, but in the end everything is just one thing.²⁸⁴

A patio is a family is a plumbing system is a memory is a novel is a life is a death. Or, as formulated in *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*: “Nothing is not substitutable with something else.”²⁸⁵

One might read an echo of this invocation of universal substitutability in the same primordial sensorial unity I critiqued in theories of ambience in Chapter 1; a “diffuse, disseminated presence” that connects one with a “situation as a whole”²⁸⁶; or which consists of

²⁸⁴ Lin, *Patio*.

²⁸⁵ Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 108.

²⁸⁶ Thibaud, “From situated perceptions to urban ambiances,” 4.

“weak a sense of warmth towards ... a world without a center or edge that includes everything.”²⁸⁷ In “Why Ambient Poetics? Outline for a Depthless Ecology,” Morton claims that ambience is the affect most “appropriate to an age of global warming” other than “a cry of terrible pain.”²⁸⁸ But, ambience is a state which precludes direct, conscious action, and neither the growing horrors of climate change nor the insidious creep of technocapitalist control can be combatted solely by a “weak sense of warmth towards one’s world.” Thus, we are left with the question: how can structural change occur? What does this state of de-hierarchization, of pre-interpretation, of weakness, allow us to *do*?

In his analysis of climate change as an “ambient mode” of narration in Alexandra Kleeman’s *Something New Under the Sun*, Therieau identifies the contradictory potential of ambience to manifest both as “merging of body and environment” and “hermetic insulation from one’s environment.”²⁸⁹ Do we here, too, end up in the same trap, wherein the conceptions of ambience as diffuse and continuous sensory boundlessness, on the one hand, or an attunement to signifying structure, on the other, become indistinguishable in that they both allow for “everything” to become “just one thing”?

In his shift to object-oriented ecocriticism, Morton offers the following critique of ambience: “To hypostatize fluidity above the static is to apply a single translation to all objects ... [Rather,] OOO is saying that behind every flow, behind every stasis, there is an object that cannot be reduced to anything whatsoever.”²⁹⁰ Thus, just as “[i]t is impossible for me to peel

²⁸⁷ Morton, “Why Ambient Poetics?”, 52.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Therieau, “The Ambient Mode,” 9, 35.

²⁹⁰ Morton, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” 208.

myself away from the *totality of my phenomenological being* ... so all entities whatsoever constantly *translate* other objects *into their own terms*.”²⁹¹

The argument, however, that every object could have its “*own terms*,” that it somehow *possesses* an innate mode of “translation”—in other words, a kind of *signifying structure*—“prior to [any] relations,” fundamentally contradicts the notion of “translation” in itself.²⁹² For, any kind of “translation” is predicated upon relation, a process of both continuity *and* difference. Morton’s object-oriented critique of ambience thus only serves to reinforce its same mythical deferral to primordial wholeness—simply on the scale of the eternal singular “one,” instead of the infinite. If all that can be said to exist in a world is either an infinite totality of nothingness or one’s own hermetical phenomenological singularity, how could one even begin to think a relationality to this world, to think that one has a material *existence*, and thus that one’s actions *matter*?

This is where I find the *textuality* in Lin’s “ambient textuality” to be an essential provocation to such philosophies that place the notion of sensorial unity prior to, and thus somehow liberating from, signification. Textuality precludes such an opposition. As a process of substitution and exchange, driven by supplementarity, or death, or desire, it can never have recourse to a totality; for it depends upon relation.

It is possible, perhaps inevitable, for language to neutralize difference, to elide nuance, to impart harmful ideology. But, in a system motivated by incompleteness, contingency is also inevitable. Textuality is ambient: it circulates, self-reproduces, with and without our attention, constantly playing with and confusing the relations between terms. And, ambience is textual,

²⁹¹ Ibid., 207 (my emphasis).

²⁹² Ibid., 207, 205 (my emphasis).

insofar as textuality is material. In “Matter Without Bodies,” an essay on Derrida and materialism, Claire Colebrook writes:

There is *no* way of knowing the proper sense of a text: not because text (as material) mediates or conveys a once-present sense, but because sense *is* material. The complexity of sense never takes the form of a body, a ‘meaning’ that was once in the mind of a psyche and that had a certain integrity only to be fragmented in its passage to transcription. Textual materiality deprives us of such simple, corporeal and bounded integrities.²⁹³

In this formulation, understanding the material world as textual is not a rejection of affect or sensory experience in favor of totalizing abstraction, but rather a recognition of the “complexity of sense” itself: that the inextricability of textuality and materiality might point us to a certain incompleteness of being as such, reformulated as the process of *becoming*.

Toward the end of *The Patio and the Index*, the narrator states:

People don’t think nature can be impoverished, but it can be. It can be just as poor as the people who own it and do not regard it as “resource” or its despoliation as “crisis.” The language of crisis, like the language of unnecessary optimism, and sometimes of poetry, was not a part of this landscape...²⁹⁴

This passage is one of the only moments in the novel in which Lin explicitly engages with questions of ecological ethics. Of course, it would be disingenuous to instrumentalize this single passage in a fictional text as emblematic of a complete philosophy of nature or a prescription for a course of action in our world. However, I offer it as an ambiguous gesture that might serve as a starting point for working our way toward a critical productivity in ambience.

²⁹³ Claire Colebrook, “Matter Without Bodies,” *Derrida Today* vol. 4 no. 1 (2011), 19.

²⁹⁴ Lin, *Patio*.

What this passage presents is a view of the organic ecological world and the so-called ‘subjects’ (or ‘objects’) who live in, or with, it as sharing in many, potentially infinite, perpetual, mutually implicating processes motivated by incompleteness, unfinishedness, “impoverishment.” As an alternative to the “language of crisis,” which creates a hierarchy of catastrophe, death, and violence according to an exceptionalizing logic, this passage offers an encounter with the death and violence that is ambient to being itself: a recognition of the differential structure, and thus the absence, that is necessary for any relation to come into being, and that is both its condition of possibility and its eternal contingency.

Poetry is not always “a part of this landscape.” Metaphor is not inherently liberating, just as it is not inherently beautiful. But, perhaps, an attunement to the structure of our textual world, our world-as-textual, can serve as a state of increased potential: a mode of receptiveness toward the indefinite possibility for that structure to change.

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