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An Uncanny Vernacular: Comparing the Radical Modernisms of Lorine Niedecker and Lesbia Harford

Modernist studies have been bound by the local, notes Andreas Huyssen in his recent essay, ‘Modernism at Large.’ This is reinforced by their disciplinary compartmentalizing through departments of national literatures. He argues that ‘We still lack a workable model of comparative studies able to go beyond the traditional approaches that ... take national cultures as the units to be compared and which rarely pay attention to the unevenness of flows of translation, transmission, and appropriation’.1 Rather than consider a ‘mosaic’ of different modernisms, each separated from the others by their cultural borders, modernist scholars are now beginning to trace the migration of ideas, or their cross-cultural flows.2 Yet influences and dialogues are often along set geopolitical lines. In early twentieth-century Australia, newly a nation, poetry and criticism was largely inward-looking; if it did look outward, it was set on differentiating itself from that of England or decrying the ‘yellow peril’ of Asia. American modernism, when outward looking, was focused predominantly on trans-Atlantic exchange, but had a quite different negotiation of Europe in light of its quite different history. Of course, there were exceptions to this cartography of encounter, such as the Australian poet Mary Gilmore’s interest in South American poetry, but that too was partly shaped by similarities to Australia in its colonial past. There was some unilateral flow from the America to Australia in popular cultural forms like music and early cinema that then influenced poetic production (such as can be found in the work of Kenneth Slessor, as Philip Mead has recently suggested).3 Yet direct flows or exchanges in poetry and poetics were relatively rare. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s love poetry was a popular but critically berated import to Australia; the American critic Hartley Grattan travelled to and wrote some of the earliest history of Australian literature; Marie Pitt and Harry Hooton read Carl Sandburg; Bernard O’Dowd espoused the value of Whitman to any who cared to listen. Zora Cross provided lyrics alongside Amy Lowell in Two Songs for Medium Voice (1913), while expatriate Australian poet Anna Wickham published in American leftist magazines like The Liberator and New Republic.

These trans-Pacific crossings are now being discussed more and more. Yet I would argue that we need to consider how the ‘numerousness’ of cultural modernisms has moments of correspondence or homologies that are often beyond direct or visible (that is, mappable) connections. This is not to go over old ground and
suggest a universalizing perspective of modernism, but rather to identify points of alignment while maintaining the specificity of cultural variance. Susan Stanford Friedman proposes a reading strategy that she terms ‘cultural parataxis’ which is based on a poetics usually associated with ‘high modernism,’ that is, ‘the juxtaposition of disparate elements in non-hierarchical ways, with syntactic and thematic connections unspecified, left open for the reader to construct’. A dialogic method based on global juxtapositions, Friedman’s cultural parataxis de-centres canonical European and American modernisms. It does not require ‘itineraries of influence’ and recognises points of similarity while simultaneously identifying key differences, due to other narratives impacting upon the evolution of cultural production or careers. While such a methodology is attractive in foregrounding how local context shades understandings of aesthetics and identity, I find its advocacy of randomness somewhat troubling. Friedman posits a critical ‘wandering’, an experiment that is ‘provisional and not fully theorized,’ as she remarks in an earlier essay which also focuses on methodological juxtaposition and collage. While Friedman’s focus is on her reader, the critic’s own associational processes need to be interrogated for how they are motivated and informed. As Ruth Jennison contends, ‘a literary history of shared formal trajectories and/or political commitments’ between writers who have had no direct contact still needs to be done. So moving away from Friedman’s approach (which, nevertheless, signals an important paradigm shift in modernist studies), I want to go back to a more traditional comparative model, one that does not focus on evidentiary paper-trails of affiliation or geographic intersections but returns instead to first principles of resemblance. In comparing contemporaries whose work displays key resemblances in style and content yet who are otherwise ‘distant’ (as opposed to the term of ‘proximity’ that informs some models of transnationalism), I reposition such writers beyond the paradigms of nation or localised movements that may have hitherto dominated their reception.

In this essay, I want to undertake the specific comparative case study of Lesbia Harford (1891–1927) and Lorine Niedecker (1903–1970), poets born slightly more than a decade apart at the turn of the twentieth century whose work is usually read only through their respective national contexts. The formal and thematic resemblances between their writing and careers are so striking as to be uncanny. This sense of uncanniness is emphasized by Niedecker and Harford’s recuperation of the folk genre as a vehicle to raise Left consciousness, with the uncanny being mobilised by both to critique regimes of power. Neither poet travelled overseas and both lived in the one place for most of their lives. Both Niedecker and Harford’s work was not
recognised during their lifetime; both were rarely anthologized and both made little attempt to create for themselves a literary career (preferring instead to ‘give’ poems to particular friends). As Peter Middleton suggests in relation to Niedecker, there was a resistance to professionalisation which might be seen to ‘evoke a special kind of expertise’, but likewise, neither was interested in her poetry being viewed politically. Writing in the wake of World War One, they held in common (and with many others), a radical vision of social justice, which was informed by Marxist analyses and socialist allegiances. In different degrees, they would be influenced by Leo Tolstoy, who condemned the class system and a bourgeoisie who ignored the suffering of the impoverished. Both Niedecker and Harford were associated with artistic formations situated on the Left: for Niedecker, this was Objectivism (although she occupied a fairly marginal position through her initially close but later difficult relationship, with the poet Louis Zukofsky). Lesbia Harford was associated with a loose group of socialist-oriented writers, including founding Communist Party members including Guido Baracchi and Katharine Susannah Prichard. She was involved in the Industrial Workers of the World, whose platforms were industrial action and direct action. Attracting a fairly mobile sector of the working class (dockworkers, shearsers, miners, and fruitpickers), the IWW hoped to unite the entire working class into a movement (one Big Union) that would not discriminate in terms of sex, race, age, skill or culture. A friend of Harford’s, May Brodney, notes that for Lesbia the ‘working class movement contained vitality, the germ of a new social birth and the creative material for a better social order’.

Yet for both Niedecker and Harford, the sense of social inequities was heightened by declining family fortunes. Both had relatively affluent childhoods: Jenny Penberthy notes that the family of Niedecker’s mother owned much of Black Hawk Island and there are plenty of photos of large family gatherings in all their finery. Lesbia’s brother, Esmond Keogh, also recalls large family events, including one at which a film of a train was shown at a birthday party. In 1900, Lesbia’s father became bankrupt, increasingly took to drink and, in the following year or two, left his wife to raise their four children alone. First her mother, and then Lesbia herself, were forced to earn their livings. Lesbia would work at coaching and blue-collar jobs in order to put herself through a law degree, still a rare thing for a woman then, perhaps initially seeing it as the way to achieve justice for the socially disempowered. Like Lesbia’s parents, the marriage of Lorine’s parents broke down although far more slowly; her father became involved with a neighbour and eventually impecunious as he gradually sold off his properties on Black Hawk Island and suffered a failure of his carp business. An only child,
Lorine enrolled in a college education but had to leave in her second year in order to attend to her sick mother. The Depression brought to an end a short marriage to Frank Hartwig, an ex-employee of her father’s. Like Lesbia, Lorine had a heightened sense of social injustices, and of the the instability or ‘floating’ nature of the world around her.

Both Niedecker and Harford worked at menial jobs and identified themselves with the working class. Listing her occupation as ‘laborer’ on her marriage license to Al Millen, Niedecker worked in a number of jobs, including librarian, radio scriptwriter, stenographer and proofreader for the local journal Hoard’s Dairyman, and as a cleaning woman at the Fort Atkinson Memorial Hospital. Despite her professional qualifications, Harford never practiced as a lawyer, working instead in a series of jobs as student coach, servant, and factory worker. DuPlessis suggests that Niedecker was ‘inside the working class, yet outside it by virtue of her artistic production’. Harford, too, existed both inside and outside this class; different not so much for her poetry, which few knew about, but because of her physical frailty (she was born with a congenital heart disorder). It is perhaps even more accurate to say that Niedecker and Harford were ex-centric to the working class due to their more privileged childhood and extended education. As DuPlessis notes, Niedecker sought to ‘disappear into the folk from whom she came’. Harford also wrote as one of the working girls, claiming a collective ‘we’: ‘Cherry, plum blossom, in old tin jug … we can see it all our working hours,’ yet she ends the same poem with the more separate and remote, ‘I never met girls who so loved sweet flowers’.

Both Niedecker and Harford wanted to integrate poetry into a materialist practice. Elizabeth Willis suggests that Niedecker espoused a ‘lived aesthetic’ whereby art and labour became inextricable. Harford held a similar aesthetic. Their attention to the domestic and the commonplace, the overheard and the invisible, became the basis for a broader radical politics. Both Harford and Niedecker were familiar with avant-garde, high cultural practices. Harford’s brother Esmond and his friends had introduced her to the European movements of Cubism and Vorticism. Niedecker’s reading would lead to an early interest in Surrealism. Yet both would turn to vernacular forms, namely folk and nursery rhyme to explore everyday life as sedimentary layers of various pasts and the present. Harford grew up with folktales, her brother Esmond recalling how he had to read Maori folktales to his maternal grandmother when she was dying. Declaring Harford a ‘genuine Irish singer,’ Guido Baracchi recalls that many of her poems ‘originally had lovely little tunes which she had composed’. He reflected: ‘Could we but recapture them, I believe certain irregularities in her verse, occasionally
observable when read, would as a rule be found to be completely resolved in these tunes. Niedecker would also write of singing ‘at the top of [her] voice when folky records are being played on the phonograph’ and was interested in Cid Corman’s book of blues lyrics. She joked to Zukofsky that ‘Mebbe I shdn’t ever have gone to NY to meet the real writer [i.e. Zukofsky] but shd. have stayed in my little country patch and written country ballads to be sung with a geetar!’

While Niedecker would ‘ham up’ her back country identity, she was interested in kinship and things being handed down from generation to generation. She noted that her first book, *New Goose* (1946), was ‘based on the folk—and a desire to get down direct speech (Williams [Carlos Williams’]) influence and here was my mother, daughter of the rhyming, happy grandfather mentioned above, speaking whole chunks of down-to-earth (o very earthy) magic, descendent, for sure of *Mother Goose* (I her daughter, sits and floats, you know).’ Niedecker conceived of poetry as ‘the folk-tales of the mind and us creating our own remembering’. Poetry was the ‘outcome of experimentation with subconscious and with folk—all good poetry must contain elements of both or stems from them—plus the rational, organizational force.’ Niedecker combined studies of the unconscious undertaken by the Surrealists with the idea of a collective unconscious. Harford’s primary reference to the unconscious was in the poem ‘Lovers Parted’ which carries an epigraph from Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*: ‘With the awakening of the memory of a forbidden action there is combined the awakening of the tendency to carry out the action.’ The last stanza sets up the paradox of the past:

The past is gone. We must believe  
It has no power to change our lives.  
Yet still our constant hearts rejoice  
Because the past survives.

Lee O’Brien argues that genres such as the ballad, folklore, and folk tale, might hold ‘unconscious’ narration, existing on the margins of civilized, urbanized, and industrial society and full of the subject matter, modes, and registers that ‘cultural’ discourse masked and apparently denies. It is in such literary forms, ‘where the writer has to all appearances taken up his stance on the ground of common reality’ that the uncanny is, or can be manifested. In his 1919 essay of the same name, Freud would characterize the uncanny as an experience of being in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously (he notes that *unheimlich* is the opposite of *heimlich* (‘homely’) and *heimisch* (‘native’). Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs argue that his essay addressed ‘one’s sense of place in a modern, changing environment,’ and connected ‘to anxieties which [were] symptomatic
of an ongoing process of realignment in the post-war modern world’. The nursery or folk rhyme might be viewed as formally relational, as well as semantically doubled, as the subject returns back to pre-lyric form and generates a sense of the strange within the familiar. The uncanny produces a condition of unsettledness, a productively unstable dynamic as two positions are inhabited at the same time. For Harford and Niedecker, this is the position of being part of the working class but also always a-part from it. Yet, as Ruth Jennison points out, it is also geographic: the uneven development of modernity results in the modern sitting alongside the primitive or provincial. As Jennison discerns, the rural—one might substitute the Antipodean colonies for Harford—is a place popularly conceived of as ‘behind’ in time (to the metropolis, for instance) but is ‘uncannily’ also ahead. Against the fantasy that ‘capital revolutionizes the means of production inevitably, uniformly and ecstatically’, Jennison contends that it ‘thrives on a mottled geography of varied levels of industrialization within and between nation-states’.

Harford and Niedecker’s ambivalent status to the working-class folk would be evident in poems like Harford’s ‘I do hate the folk I love’, where the trivial ‘word and act’ of chatty church-going people ‘hurt so’ and the narrator longs for ‘the strength to love like them/Not too much’. Niedecker’s representation was even harsher:

I worked the print shop
right down among em
the folk from whom all poetry flows
and dreadfully much else.

I was Blondie
I carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists
down by Larry the Lug,
I’d never get anywhere
because I’d never had suction,
pull, you know, favor, drag,
well-oiled protection.

Niedecker’s women also ‘go to church’ and the narrator hears their gossip once more as ‘rehashed radio barbs’. Not included in their conversation, she wonders: ‘What would they say if they knew/I sit for two months on six lines/of poetry?’ Her lack of social articulation and attractiveness is reinforced by her list of alternative descriptors: ‘suction ... favor, drag, well-oiled protection,’ with the automobile metaphor verging on advertisement (‘well-oiled protection’) while the phrase ‘you know’ appeals for acknowledgement and confirmation. As for Williams, colloquialisms and ordinary objects would be an important part of Harford and Niedecker’s poetics, their recirculation within the poem undermining
taken-for-granted social hierarchies. DuPlessis points out that Niedecker often emphasizes the predatory elements underlying many Mother Goose rhymes. Harford too wrote of how children’s games often generate alienation, dread, grief, and stagings of death. For both, such viciousness continues on into adulthood, everyday rituals often carrying latent violence.

Both Harford and Niedecker participated in versions of the Popular Front. Harford was closely involved with the Melbourne and Sydney branches of Industrial Workers of the World and become, for a while, one of the few women organizers of the Victorian Clothing Trades Union. Michael Davidson has traced how Niedecker’s work for the Federal Writers’ Project was undertaken in an atmosphere of Left activism, her contributions to *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State*, just one demonstration of her interest in what could be termed ‘proletarian regionalism’. Peter Middleton suggests that Niedecker ‘would have had to learn some of the skills of the folklorist to record local idioms and anecdotes that could typify a regional culture, and so became that uneasy figure of the participant-observer’. He cites a section from Wisconsin that attempts to represent the town of Pepin through its speech: ‘Their speech draws many images from the great river. Seeing a drunken man staggering up the street in early spring, an idler remarks: ‘He’s sure goin’ up the river’ and his crony replies, ‘Yep, he’s gonna burn all the ice out of Lake Pepin’.” In her poetry, Niedecker explored how familiar everyday objects become haunting when viewed through a museal gaze.

The museum man!
I wish he’d taken Pa’s spitbox!
I’m going to take that spitbox out
and bury it in the ground
and put a stone on top.
Because without that stone on top
it would come back.

Harford too saw an archival relationship between self and past in her poem ‘Body and Soul’:

Through the Museum
I stroll, & see
Goblets fashioned in Arcady,
Spears from the Islands, and robes from Tyre—
Gew-gaws of pomp & of old desire

On one of the walls
A looking glass
Catches my image as I pass.
Austerely from mirrored eyes, I see
The soul of the past look out at me.
As Harford suggests, the past possesses the present; here, the self is constituted by history. While Harford constructs a modern flâneuse in a number of her poems (a narrator moving through busy city streets), she often refers back to a pre-industrial world. In one poem, she recounts a manufacturer selling trucks and using horses once more (‘Then life grew stronger in me because life/Had triumphed in this case and would perhaps/Finally triumph over the machine’). Niedecker too often contrasts craft against commerce, the pre-industrial against modernisation. In ‘Hand Crocheted Rug,’ Niedecker writes of recycling materials of people’s lives (‘the skirt I’ve saved so long,/Sally’s valance, the twins’ first calico’) to make a rug that ‘nevermind, cramped/around back not yet turn of the century’ with the words of ‘Grandpa forward/from the shop, ‘Ought to have a machine’. One of her best-known poems is about how a ‘little granite pail … was enough to carry me thru’. Holding dreams and hopes through from childhood into adulthood, the modest ‘little granite pail’ becomes almost talismanic, an item of comfort and security. The narrator focuses not on what specific memories are associated with the pail (as this is perhaps now part of her subconscious) but on the present ‘blueness’ of its handle, such colour symbolising the feeling of serenity now connected to the pail.

Niedecker would entertain the co-existence of modern and outmoded or abandoned thought through the presence of nature, as in the following short poem:

A monster owl
out on the fence
flew away. What
is it the sign
of? The sign of
an owl.

At once, she points to the possibility of the supernatural, with the owl traditionally seen as messenger from a world beyond. This is reinforced by the adjective ‘monster’ and positioning the owl on the fence (locating it on the edge of the enclosed). While setting up this potential threat to the familiar, Niedecker responds with contemporary common-sense, that it represents nothing more than itself. In another poem, she writes

I said to my head, Write something.
It looked me dead in the face.
Look around, dear head, you’ve never read
of the ground that takes you away.
Speed up, speed up, the frosted windshield’s
A fern spray.
Here, Niedecker doubles the head, as the head looks back at ‘me dead in the face’. Freud notes: ‘Dismembered limbs, a severed head ... have something particularly uncanny about them’. Niedecker generates a Medusa head which looks back at ‘me dead in the face,’ freezing the individual in a moment of terror. Georg Büchner previously used the Medusa head in *Lenz* as an image for mimesis, a metonymy for anxiety over the struggle for representation. Niedecker foregrounds representation’s ‘unstable ground’: reality is like a frosted window where one cannot see ahead. The windshield holds a semblance of a fern spray but not the fern spray itself, just as words refer to that which is absent. Against the state of freezing, Niedecker urges movement into the unknown: ‘Speed up, speed up’.

At the same time as she was working on the Project, Niedecker conceived the poems that appeared in her first book, *New Goose* (1946). Its title invokes the classic of childhood rhymes and stories, Mother Goose, while claiming a revision of that text and in that revision, a defamiliarisation of childhood, familiar sayings. Both poets demonstrated a life-long commitment to Left politics, focusing on ‘particulars’, the immediate, local reality in a way that sought to bring an awareness of structures of power. Michael Davidson argues that Niedecker turned to ‘minor’ genres such as folk idioms and nursery rhymes as a way to ‘comment on marginal subject positions in U.S. culture generally’; this might also apply to Harford in relation to Australian culture. Yet both were careful to concentrate on the specificity of each subject position, instead demonstrating how such positioning (and with it, sometimes attendant inequities) becomes naturalized, internalized, and fixed through routine interactions such as gossip and nicknames (Niedecker’s narrator becoming Blondie rather than any individualising of her as a subject) and everyday rituals like carrying hog feeder price lists down to ‘Larry the Lug’.

Niedecker’s sense of the uncanny with the domestic item of the ‘clothesline post’ likened to a Native American’s sacred totem, yet no carvings ‘distinguish the Niedecker tribe/from the rest; every seventh day they wash:/worship sun; fear rain, their neighbours’ eyes; raise their hands from ground to sky,/and hang or fall by the whiteness of it all’. As DuPlessis notes, the ‘primitive acknowledgement and respect of past kinship is erased in the modern community with values now in social uniformity’ (also expressed racially in ‘the whiteness of it all’), hygiene and how one is viewed in ‘their neighbours’ eyes’. The uncanny is often manifested as occupying gendered norms (such as marriage, housekeeping) while also providing a resistance to them. As in some ways an extension of Left activism, Niedecker and Harford wrote of the bohemian value of free love although, for both, this would be complicated by a concomitant
desire to belong. Both would become infatuated by men who did not return their love in kind: for Niedecker, this was Zukofsky; for Harford, it was first Billy Earsmann and then Baracchi. Having watched their lovers marry other women, both then wrote poems about the sons that came out of these subsequent relationships, transferring and evolving the earlier (romantic) love through a maternal logic. Both would marry late in life, Niedecker to Al Millen, a housepainter from Milwaukee, Lesbia to Pat Harford, an anarchic artist also on the margins of the IWW. Literary friends of Niedecker and Harford could not understand ‘why’ these marriages occurred, the relationships seeming to have sprung more out of friendship than from a grand passion. Significantly, both men were alcoholics and the relationships difficult, claustrophobic, and poverty-strained. The poems they wrote were uncannily similar. Both poets would express dissatisfaction with housewifery and yearn for time to think and write. Niedecker wrote:

Cleaned all surfaces  
and behind all solids  
and righted leaning things

Considered then, becurtained  
the metaphysics  
of flight from housecleanings.55

Niedecker plays here with what can be seen and what cannot, the abstract as ‘becurtained’ or veiled by the solid surfaces of the domestic. Harford also wrote:

I want this thing and that—  
A pudding bowl, a saucepan.  
And a hat  
For Pat.

I note some grease,—or grime,—  
A cobweb on the ceiling  
Where’s the time  
For rhyme?

This being wife,  
Is not romance, not Hate, not  
‘Love to the Knife’  
But life.56

‘Love to the Knife’ is the kind of title used in pulp fiction read by housewives. Harford contrasts the absolute feelings of Romanticism (‘Love’ and ‘Hate’) with the mundanity of small-l ‘life’, where the weight of cleaning (ironically suggested by the ‘cobweb on the ceiling’) overtakes creative flight. While many of their poems show
contempt for consumerism, both Harford and Niedecker would write of the continuing, often conflicting desire for ‘things’ (Niedecker writes of wanting a lawnmower; Harford of buying a red hat).57 Caught up in the business of living, both wrote of feeling emptied. Niedecker writing, ‘What horror to awake at night/and in the dimness see the light./Time is white/mosquitoes bite/I’ve spent my life on nothing’ (Collected 147). As ‘Nothing,/sitting around with Something’s wife,’ her narrator concludes, ‘I’m pillowed and padded, pale and puffing/lifting household stuffing—/carpets, dishes/benches, fishes/I’ve spent my life in nothing’ (Collected 148). Niedecker contrasts the excess of objects (‘household stuffing’) with the repeated phrase ‘I’ve spent my life on nothing’. The term ‘spent’ suggests both physical exhaustion and the relentless economy of capitalism. Harford would also pen the poem ‘Grotesque’:

My
Man
Says
I weigh about four ounces,
Says I must have hollow legs.
And then say I,
‘Yes,
I’ve hollow legs & a hollow soul & body.
There is nothing left of me.
You’ve burnt me dry.

You
Have
Run
Through all my veins in fever
Through my soul in fever for
An endless time
Why,
This small body is like an empty snail shell
All the living soul of it
Burnt out in lime.’ (Poems 96)

Lying narrow on the page, the poem too is physically small. ‘Horror’ and ‘grotesque’ are both words associated with the Gothic; the fragility of bodily boundaries (in the ‘mosquito bite’ and the ‘empty snail shell’) sees the evacuation of the soul.

Both Harford and Niedecker would turn to the past for literary affiliation, viewing Gothic writers Emily Brontë and Mary Shelley respectively as examples of women writers who persisted against the burdens of family. In ‘A Brontë Legend,’ Harford retells Emily Brontë’s life story, starting with the traditionally biographical line, ‘They say she was a creature of the moor,/A lover of angels, silence
bound’ (italics added) (*Poems* 121). Yet Harford disputes the remoteness that Emily was accused of by her sister Charlotte. Harford notes that Emily had little ‘leisure for the moor/Or wandering’ with her time taken up with nursing a brother she did not like and ‘Housework and all the ironing to do’. Having to ‘mend and sew,’ the wonder for Harford is that Emily wrote a book as there seemed so little time for a contemplative life (*Poems* 121). Niedecker too questioned whether the ‘real’ Mary Shelley could be known, ‘Who was Mary Shelley? What was her name/before she married?’ Like Harford’s poem, the men take up attention, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein created ‘after Byron, Shelley, talked the candle down’. The brief facts of Mary Shelley’s life is that ‘She read Greek, Italian/She bore a child//Who died/and yet another child/who died’ and that Frankenstein was created ‘before her husband was to drown’ (*Collected* 212). Harford, too, notes of Emily: ‘Her brother died. But she died just as soon/As she had nursed dear Charlotte through the shock/Of Patrick’s death’ (*Poems* 121). Both Harford and Niedecker foreground the sense of temporality, the fleeting nature of life in these earlier writers’ lives. Niedecker further viewed an affiliation to the Brontës in terms of identifying with a particular kind of unbounded ‘wild’ space. ‘The Brontes[sic] had their moors, I have my marshes,’ she wrote to Zukofsky (Penberthy, *Correspondence* 146).

Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes that Niedecker’s poetry has stylistic elements similar to the ballad, such as ‘leaping’ (including ‘a springing forward, the omission of details, the overlooking of connective and explanatory materials’), condensation, and attention drawn to key symbolic images (‘Anonymous,’ 134). Harford’s poetry was similarly minimalist. Yet while the ballad form often has standard stanzas and a story, both Niedecker and Harford’s poetry would be more impressionistic (or, for Niedecker, Objectivist) than story-driven. In a recent essay, DuPlessis discerns that Niedecker’s poetry often works through suggestiveness and afterimages, the fragmentariness of her method of condensation constituting more accurately memory as ‘a nerve-sense, a vibration, a colour, a rhythm’ (‘Fusions,’ 159). What we are left with is an affect that is difficult to articulate or make sense of. We see this in poems like ‘I’ve spent my life on nothing’ with the juxtaposition of images through rhyme, such as ‘Time is white’ and ‘mosquitoes bite’, together giving a sense of the small, almost imperceptible stings of grief, that lead to a more ongoing, larger numbness.

Noting that the ballad is traditionally a form which expresses ‘the implacability of the things that happen’ and often focuses on the powerless, Du Plessis argues that there is a strong sense of fate; that is, there is often little questioning of ‘why’ things happen and attention is paid instead to the circumstances (DuPlessis notes
‘names, places, times, colors of dresses’) (‘Anonymous,’ 135). Both Niedecker and Harford’s poetry fits this tradition and foregrounds limited agency, the self mapped to particular trajectories that may have their origin in a specific past, or in one of particular class or gender configurations. DuPlessis refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s discussion of female immanence, in which Beauvoir contends that women remain fixed or ‘mired’ in a position (‘Fusions,’ 169–70). Ruth Jennison notes that the ‘splintered geographies of both individual subjectivity and modern cultural movement foreclose identity with both self and history’ (134). She cites Niedecker’s 1952 letter to Zukofsky, ‘My own mind is like a star that got to be one through no great effort of its own, just part of world stuff, and the light from it hasn’t fallen on me yet. But I feel sumpn—oh yes, they can’t take that away from me!’ (134)\(^5\) Both Harford and Niedecker demonstrate a self-consciousness of positionality but do not narrate liberation. Jennison suggests that the materialist avant-garde’s ‘residuum of subjectivity becomes the basis for [Niedecker’s] exploration of historical and individual possibility’ (134). I would suggest that both Niedecker and Harford occasionally point towards the potential for liberation which, for Harford, might be in the redness of a factory girl’s tape measure or a love-bite on a neck.\(^5\) More often than not, transcendence from the social is signified by a thing of nature; for Harford, a flower (wattle on a workbench, flowering gums in the street, lilacs on a mantelshelf\(^6\) ); for Niedecker, usually a tree or a bird.\(^6\) Yet both would also point to the complex interrelationship of nature and the man-made.\(^6\) It is their selective use of language (the suggestive soundings of the vernacular and the lessness of what is said) that mystery or newness is rendered to the mundane, the familiar estranged. For both poets, material change had to be linguistic as well. Niedecker declared:

> A country’s economics sick  
> Affects its people’s speech.  
> No bread and cheese and strawberries  
> I have no pay, they say.

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Till in revolution rises  
The strength to change

The undigestible phrase. (Collected 86)
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Harford too wrote:

> Swift-gliding cars  
> Through town and country winging,  
> Like cigarettes  
> Are deemed unfit for singing.

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**HECATE**

89
Into old rhyme
New words come tripping slowly
Hail to the time
When they possess it wholly. (Poems 81)

As Harford notes: ‘Word and thought are dear to me/As the word & thought ‘mystery’.\textsuperscript{63}

While more detailed work is required to demonstrate further resemblances between Harford and Niedecker’s work, this essay demonstrates how both were exploring a radical modernism in very similar ways. In one respect, their uncanniness of poetics is an indicator of how Marxist ideologies were effectively being disseminated globally and applied in particular aesthetic and political ways in the early twentieth century. Their shared sense of belatedness and avant-gardism also speaks of a broader philosophical reconceptualisation of time and subjectivity. Their attention to and resistance to the limitations of a gendered agency likewise reflects the filtered-down effects of first-wave feminism, however indirectly. To undertake comparative work without the logic of some overt nexus of influence or affiliation enables us to extend modernist studies further, to explore such resonances between the texts and careers of familiar, well-known modernists (typically North American and European) and those less known and perhaps rethink the occasional uncanniness of modernist developments.

Ann Vickery

Notes

\textsuperscript{2} Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Cultural Parataxis and Transnational Landscapes of Reading: Toward a Locational Modernist Studies,’ Modernism, p.36.
\textsuperscript{4} Friedman, ‘Cultural Parataxis,’ p.36.
\textsuperscript{5} Friedman, ‘Cultural Parataxis,’ pp.36–37.
\textsuperscript{8} See, for example, Ken Gelder, ‘Proximate Reading: A Transnational Approach to Australian Literature,’ paper presented at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature Conference, 9 July 2009.
\textsuperscript{9} One of the key exceptions to this is Peter Middleton’s invaluable ‘The British Niedecker’. In this essay, Middleton’s transnational critique is undertaken by tracing the lines of Niedecker’s literary production. He considers the role of British publishing (he notes that ‘over half the books Lorine Niedecker published
in her lifetime were published in Britain’ p.247) on her reception (both in the United Kingdom and the United States) and on her own evolving poetics.

10 As a schoolgirl, Harford boarded in Ballarat for a year or so and, as a young woman, she lived in Sydney for a year or so. Most of her life, however, was spent in Melbourne. Niedecker grew up in rural Wisconsin, visited New York as a young woman, and took vacations touring the United States with her second husband in her sixties.


14 May Brodney, Review of Poems of Lesbia Harford, MSS 10882, Box 5, Folder 13, State Library of Victoria.


16 Esmond Keogh, letter dated 23rd December [no year], Marjorie Pizer Papers, MSS 7428, Box 2, Folder 5.


22 Esmond Keogh, letter dated 23 December, Marjorie Pizer Papers, MSS 7428, Box 2, Folder 5.


34 Jennison, ‘Waking into Ideology,’ p.133.

35 Harford, Poems, 63.

36 Niedecker, Collected, p.142.

37 Niedecker, Collected, p.143.

38 See Harford’s ‘Children’s Games’ dated 8 February 1925. Vol A, Folder 1, Marjorie Pizer Papers, MSS 7428, Mitchell Library.


42 The ‘spitbox’ is particularly significant as its contents symbolize the breakdown between bodily boundaries. As Middleton points out, the poem itself is museological, in placing folk speech on display (“Folk Base,” 177).


44 Harford, Poems, p.94.

45 Harford, Poems, p.128.

46 Niedecker, Collected, p.102.

47 Niedecker, Collected, p.96.

48 Niedecker, Collected, p.103.

49 Niedecker, Collected, p.100.

50 Freud, Standard, p.244.


52 Davidson, ‘Life by Water,’ p.4.

53 Niedecker, Collected, p.100.

54 DuPlessiss, ‘Anonymous,’ p.120.

55 Niedecker, Collected, p.231.

56 Marjorie Pizer Papers, Vol. A, Folder 1, Box 1, Marjorie Pizer Papers, Mitchell Library.

57 See ‘A lawnmower’s one of the babies I’d have’ (Niedecker, Collected, p.96); ‘I bought a red hat’ (Harford, Poems, p.105).

58 The letter is in Niedecker’s Correspondence, p.213.

59 See ‘To look across at Moira gives me pleasure’ (Harford, Poems, p.100). In ‘An Improver,’ Harford writes of ‘A little rosy mark beneath the chin … If her mother
knew/She’d be ashamed, but a girl-friend like me/Made her feel proud to show
her kisses to’ (Poems, p.95).

60 See ‘Pink eucalyptus flowers’ (Harford, Poems, p.98); ‘Pruning Flowering
Gums’ (Harford, Poems, pp.121–22); ‘... on her mantelshelf/I saw some
lilies,/Image of myself,/And most unlike your dream of purity’ (Harford, Poems,
p.97).

61 See for instance ‘Sunday’s motor-cars’ (Niedecker, Collected, p.127).

62 See for instance, Niedecker’s ‘Consider,’ where ships and plants are allied
through the history of imperialism and through the ship’s original status as a
‘living plant’ (Collected, p.283). In Harford’s ‘All Knowledge ...’ daffodils are not
only likened to ‘golden dames’ that ‘Honour our humble flat’ but flora more
generally viewed as an alternative area of knowledge to the knowledge of ships
(Poems, p.118).

63 Lesbia Harford, ‘I love the word ’road,’’ Pizer Papers, MS 7428, Box 1, Folder 3.