

The Resilience of Vulnerability:

Writing as Misreading, Inquiry, Process (and Failure) in the Ecopoetry of Orchid Tierney

Abstract Orchid Tierney's ecopoetry is read as a poetics of vulnerability that offers a paradoxical response to the *longue-durée* environmental crisis of the Anthropocene. Focusing on *a year of misreading the wildcats* (2019) and *looking at the Tiny: Mad lichen on the surfaces of reading* (2023), this essay interprets Tierney's acceptance and assumption of a condition of deviance, incapacity, insufficiency, hazard, failure, tentativeness as indicative of a will to dwell in a state, and feeling, of fragility. Thus, attention is turned to the mode of existence of tiny organisms, simultaneously parasitical and mutualistic; reading turns to the eloquent surfaces of things.

This essay aims to offer an interpretation of Orchid Tierney's poetry as an ecopoetics of vulnerability as opposed to the abused idea of resilience as a prompt crisis-solving attitude that has been widely circulating in (literary) culture for a while. For example, Jane Hirshfield's well-known poem "Optimism," presents nature's resilience as a strategy of survival and a source of life, implying that human beings should learn from it and imitate the tenacity of a tree:

More and more I have come to admire resilience.

Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam

returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous

tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,

it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.

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But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,
mitochondria, figs—all this resinous, unretractable earth.

(*Given Sugar, Given Salt* 2002, 71)

Conversely, Tierney's poetics proposes to embrace a condition of vulnerability as a strategy for living with and managing an apparently never-ending environmental crisis. The poet accepts vulnerability as a *longue-durée* state and feeling, which she contemplates as a more faithful representation of a critical condition whose solution will be neither rapid nor easy. This concept is intentionally paradoxical because it holds within itself at least a minimal idea of a plan or procedure, assumed with the aim of coping with the crisis. The cautious claims of vulnerability, though, distinguish themselves from the overambitious pretenses of resilience; vulnerability renounces the illusion of being efficient to open up to the tangled but effective dynamics of survival of the tiniest elements that inhabit our natural environment. This attitude requires the humble consideration of the infinite, sometimes minuscule intra-actions (Barad 2007, 33)¹ of the nonhuman entities of the ecosystem and an equally humble staying with the human intra-actions that have been—and are—the causes of the crisis. Embracing the idea of vulnerability may aid one's attention in keeping focused on both. Tierney's poetry wholly accepts and exposes the lyric subject's embeddedness in the life of ecosystems and shows the author's own involvement in the processes that produce that life's endangerment, denouncing her co-responsibility in activating and maintaining them. The paradox at the heart of the strategy of vulnerability is that by keeping human intervention within the limits of attentive and unfailing observation one may gain the indispensable advantage of preserving the consciousness of human acts. Tierney asks how humans can "carbonise" poetry to signify that poetry might contribute to solving the crisis by activating the readers' perception of it and their consciousness of their own constant implication

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in it. To do this, she avails herself of an experimental poetics that “mines” the disparate languages of consumerism, “misreads” them, and breaks them down in “gyrotexts” that circulate in the same way as the plastic gyres in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. She examines poetry’s capacity to represent the crisis by means of a tentative, provisional mode of writing that may temporarily, partially, and inadequately reflect an instant of deep-time environmental degradation, as her Polaroids do.

Among the three groupings of ecopoetry identified by Laura-Gray Street and Anne Fisher-Wirth in their “Editors’ Preface” to *The Ecopoetry Anthology* (2013, xxix), I would locate Tierney’s experimentalism within “ecological poetry.” The two editors define it as poetry that “can look strange and wild on the page,” which is “often described as experimental,” and “tends to think in self-reflexive ways about how poems can be ecological or somehow enact ecology” (xxix). It obviously engages with postmodern and structuralist theories, in the wake of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry and runs the same risk of “hyperintellectualism and emotional distance or detachment” (xxix). Tierney’s first act of deconstruction of literary codes overcomes genre boundaries, which she performs in both the two works I focus on, the collection *a year of misreading the wildcats* (2019) and her latest chapbook, *looking at the Tiny: Mad lichen on the surfaces of reading* (2023).

Orchid Tierney is a poet and scholar from Aotearoa (New Zealand) who now resides in Gambier, Ohio and teaches English at Kenyon College. Notwithstanding her deconstruction of “New Zealand’s myth of being a natural, clean country because it’s still politically and socially rural,” given that “agriculture uses energy-intensive procedures and displaces Indigenous peoples,” she has avowed to a class of MA students into which I invited her that coming to the US was a shock because of the difference in the scale of goods and resource consumption (“the

US is hungry!,” MA class of May 10, 2024). Besides genres, she mixes modes of writing, and thinking, making her academic and creative activity converge around her interests in waste and waste management in contemporary Anglophone poetry, Pacific Island literature, climate change, and experimental poetics. In one of our conversations at Kenyon College, Tierney told me that the community of ecopoets with whom she converses would not define Mary Oliver, whom I was translating, as such. I am using the word “community” in the way I suppose she did during the same talk to my MA class when a student asked her what scope she thought her experimental poetry could have given that the language employed is little accessible. Tierney answered that she does not believe her poetry can change things but that it can produce conversations with other scholars and poets: it can build communities and relations among people, which may change the ambiance. This ideal community might be composed of the poets she has variously mentioned in her interviews, such as Jorie Graham, Juliana Spahr, Jennifer Scappettone, and Jonathan Skinner, and—referring to specific texts—the Ed Roberson of *City Eclogue* (2006) and the Tommy Pico of *Nature Poem* (2017). So, my first move will be to relate Tierney’s ecopoetry to my idea of “ecopoetry” in order to explore her personal ecopoetic stance in-depth and to better delineate my own reading of it as relying on a poetics of vulnerability.

I have always held that what distinguishes ecopoetry from the traditional poetry of nature is a turn in the philosophical positioning of the lyric subject in their relation to their object of observation when this object is what one might phenomenologically described as “nature.”² A looming “new nature poetry” in Anglo-American literature was put forth by Robert Langbaum, pointing out in 1959 distinguishing features of what he deemed to be a new way of representing nature, especially visible in the poetry about animals. Animals, according to Langbaum, since they are endowed with some degree of agency, are more difficult to use as objectifying images of

human meanings. Since the modernist American and English poets who abandoned the Romantic attitude of the *pathetic fallacy* (Langbaum 1959), ecopoetry has developed through the epistemological reflection initiated by the critique of speciesism offered by animal studies and its refinement by the theories now subsumed under the umbrella term of the “posthuman turn.”³ These theories have redistributed subjectivity and agency among all the entities (organic and inorganic) of the ecosystem Gaia with the help of the intersection of literary studies with cognitive studies, which has contributed to the overcoming of the long-standing Cartesian, dualistic notion of cognition in favor of an affective notion of the same as effected by human body-minds, that is, as embodied and embedded. According to J. Scott Bryson, the “new nature poetry” became “ecopoetry” during its environmental turn in the Sixties, when poets such as Gary Snyder espoused the ecological causes fostered by publications like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). This stage in the development of nature poetry may be identified with the second “grouping” of ecopoetry in Street and Fisher-Wirth’s classification, *environmental poetry*, which is directly engaged with active and politicized environmentalism and greatly influenced by social and environmental justice movements. Bryson aptly remarks that the tone of this poetry radically differed from the previous nature poetry and quotes some strong lines by Gary Snyder and Denise Levertov.⁴ This tone “of protest” is what I identify with a reactive and proactive attitude of resilience as an answer to the discovered vulnerability of *oikos*, which has persisted in the diverse kinds of ecopoetry that have been written since its official birth. I find it both in much of Jane Hirshfield’s and Mary Oliver’s appeased visions, for example, and in Robinson Jeffers’ and W. S. Merwin’s more troubled ones. Many ecopoets have assumed the limits of language foregrounded by the poststructuralist critique of the function of language⁵ to attempt the shaping of *poetic* language as an instrument for the reconciliation of culture with the nature from which

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they believe it comes. They have intentionally responded to the deconstructive mood fostered by theories like Marjorie Perloff's reading of the "radical artifice" of modernist poetry (1991) by holding on to a belief in language as potentially able to articulate human experience, supported by faith in the primacy of (nonverbal) experience, and by a view of language as a shared faculty (shared, of course, with nonhuman beings and entities) rather than a controlling prerogative.

Tierney's ecopoetry differs in the attitude it implies in its response to the crisis. Her poetics embodies a different conception of what poetry can do to assist the ecological cause. Instead of thinking of poetry as a strategy of resilience, Tierney thinks of her writing as an attempt to navigate a condition of long-acknowledged and communal vulnerability, whose hope for effectiveness lies right in the choice to *dwell* in this state of crisis, which is expressed in her experimental style and signaled by it. I am not referring here to previous experimental practices such as Les Murray's "bat English" in "Bat's Ultrasound" in the *Presence sequence* of *Translations from the Natural World* (1993), where the poet acts as the translator of animals' biosemiosis.⁶ Contemporary ecopoets like Tierney seem to fall back into a more skeptical doubting about the defining and redeeming powers of poetic language and to assume a less affirmative attitude as a more adequate response to the human perception and understanding of the "nature" surrounding them. I will unpack Tierney's experimental style and language to illustrate what I mean.

On a first reading, Tierney's poetry would not be described as accessible in the way that Oliver's would, due to a textual complexity that comes from its structural construction, at the manifold level of the book, of the poems and prose pieces, of the line, and of the language. *a year* is "definitely envisioned [...] as a collection of poetry, prose, and photography" and as a "poetry project" revolving around a research question, as the author declares in an interview that

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is attached at the end of the volume, following a bio-note, in the guise of an appendix (102). In fact, it was written alongside Tierney's PhD dissertation "Materials Poetics: Landfills and Waste Management in Contemporary Literature and Media," from which it derives some of its concerns (102). The paratext of *a year* tells of both its experimental complexity and its political agenda, which the book shares with the current trend of "ecological poetry" to which it seems to contribute. By being published by The Operating System (OS) press, it clearly positioned itself on the publishing scene: the OS, as the colophon recites, "is a member of the Radical Open Access Collective, a community of scholar-led, not-for-profit presses, journals and other open access projects. Now consisting of 40 members," they declare, "we promote a progressive vision for open publishing in the humanities and social sciences." The book license encourages its reproduction "for those who otherwise could not afford its purchase in the case of academic, personal, and other creative usage from which no profit will accrue." The reader is sent for further information about both the copyright rules and the collective to the sites of the creativecommons.org and of the radicaloa.disruptivemedia.org. Situated in the *print:documents* series of The Operating System, *a year* implicitly confirms its affiliation to the highly theoretical tradition of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, which welded political engagement and experimentation in a curious, ironic continuity with the elitist and engaged poetry of High Modernism. Here is an excerpt from the opening of the 2019 statement "Why Print Document?," by the Founder and Managing Director of The Operating System, Lynne DeSilva-Johnson, at the end of the book:

The Operating System uses the language "print document" to differentiate from the book-object as part of our mission to distinguish the act of documentation-in-book-FORM from the act of publishing as a backwards-facing replication of the book's agentive *role* as it

may have appeared the last several centuries of its history. Ultimately, I approach the book as TECHNOLOGY: one of a variety of printed documents (in this case, bound) that humans have invented and in turn used to archive and disseminate ideas, beliefs, stories, and other evidence of production (105).

This little manifesto of Print Document declares its ideological engagement and experimental activism in abstract terms. But how does it translate into a poetics of vulnerability?

I will start again from the framing paratext of the interview to narrow my perspective by gradually focusing on the table of contents, and then the titles of the poems, the opening poem, some photos, and a few lines. As it often happens with experimental poetry, the interview functions as a sort of accompanying introduction to the poems, facilitating their reading. Tierney explains in the interview how she conceives of herself as a poet (or writer, or artist) and how she conceives of writing and of poetry, especially in relation to its efficacy in dealing with environmental disaster. She also introduces the reader to one of the key new words that make up the vocabulary of her project, which refers to herself as the protagonist of the book, the *petronaut* that navigates a world—I wanted to say “disfigured,” in the language of opposing, resisting resilience, but I will say “transformed,” in the language of consciously assumed vulnerability—by oil, intentionally cultivating the sense of her complicity in it. She says:

I am a petronaut, which is to say, I am implicated in the global obsession with petroleum supercultures. Which is to say further, I recognize that I am entangled in a system that privileges the migration and development of oil and oil-related products over human and nonhuman communities. Which is also to say that I see myself as *monstruous* (or monstrously human) in this system and curious about what alternative futurities are possible if we were to abandon our dependency on oil (emphasis added, 101).

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The poet here sees herself as “monstrous” because of her implication in the anthropocentric system but at the same time opens to the healing potential of an engagement in an alternative agenda.

Tierney’s confession is only the first act of acceptance of a condition of deviance, incapacity, insufficiency, hazard, failure, and tentativeness that she lets in to her ecopoetics.⁷ Tierney adds that she sees poetry as a mode of critical thinking and journalistic investigation, by which: “We have to say what is *ugly*. Or *hurtful*. Or lovely” (emphases added, 101). And says that she sees herself “as a curator (of words, materials, ideas, relationships, and practices). And as a curator, my role is one of haphazard gleaning. Gleaning in this sense is subjective, useless, slow, and usually inefficient. It lacks craft and skill. [...] I want snapshots in time. To try to make sense of things. To reach a partial understanding” (101). The poet confesses, less than ideally, that writing is a struggle for her: “I am not always articulate or concise. And it shows. Overall, I think *a year of misreading the wildcats* is a rather incoherent and messy piece of writing. It doesn’t flow. It doesn’t have a sense of itself as a wanting entity,” so she has “learnt to embrace that hesitating, awkward, tumbling, fumbling, fuzzy side of myself. It’s okay that these poems don’t align thematically. It’s okay that they often speak over and against each other. I am more interested in their possibilities anyway [...] But by no means is this collection the final disarrangement. It’s merely one among many possibilities” (102). All these contextual quotations add to the provisional quality of her poetry, to its tentativeness, its unfinishedness, its insufficiency, its incompleteness. Experimental poetry aims at questioning the world and humans’ relation to it, but Tierney appears to be less prone to providing answers, even in the shape of hypotheses, unlike Bernadette Meyer, for example, who was generous in providing them in her *Writing Experiments* (1978).⁸ The culminating self-questioning in *a year* concerns

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the validity of poetry as a medium to ask the “urgent questions” of the Anthropocene, an overwhelming crisis that appears so difficult to handle:

a year of misreading the wildcats is a wild misreading of the entanglements of climatic and ecological degradations. It is a failed endeavour to understand our climate emergency, to write about plastic pollution, to represent environmental disaster because the causes of—and solutions to—our current moment feel overwhelming and expansive. These disasters involve abstracts: corporations, ideologies, nation-states, systems, infrastructures. Literature and history. How do we represent climate change without falling into sentimentality or disgust? How do we reconcile the individual human impact on a microscopic scale with the environmental impact caused by white supremacy, hyperactive capitalism, and colonialism on the global scale? And is poetry really the best medium to ask those urgent questions? (103-104).

Tierney’s ultimate response exposes human vulnerability in admitting to a lack of self-reliance, the opposite sentiment of a transcendental, idealistic, still anthropocentric attitude.

The poet’s formula for “navigating what is overwhelming” (Berlant 10) appears to be the will to dwell in a moment, and feeling, of crisis, in order to make vulnerability meaningful and (re)generative by means of a writing envisioned as research and process rather than as a final and definitive, and exhaustive, product. In *a year*, experimental language opens up spaces for probing possibilities of sense in the same way as instant photographs catch ephemera. The poet’s ability to play on words, and language, and tones has an almost compulsive quality to it. She works by association (often triggered by sounds), juxtaposition, analogy and antithesis or paradox. She implies meanings by changing letters in words (as in “garble | gargle,” or “carbon sink | carbon sick,” or “references | reverences,” in the table of contents) and creating neologisms

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(as in her visionary “urf,” populated by figures of petronauts, poetronauts, carbonauts, floronauts).⁹ She shifts parts of speech (as in the list of things to do on Petty Island in the fourth “carbon sink” poem, 62). She turns the rhythm of prayer into the accents of political invective (as in the impious litany of her curses of the corporations that are damaging the planet in “earth | urf,” 27). She exploits the resources of allusions (like the one to Molly Maguire, which reveals the subtext of a social justice discourse, in “prayer | suit,” 32),¹⁰ irony (as in her critique of the Poetry Foundation, in the fifth “carbon sink,” 84, where she wonders “How to drill the Poetry Foundation?”), satire (as in the United States that becomes “untied states,” 269), irreverent and sarcastic intertextuality (as in the rewriting of the nursery rhyme *Pussy-cat Mew Jumped Over a Coal* in the caption of the photo facing “prayer | suit” on page 33), environmentalist discourse (as in the open denunciation of “earth | urf,” where “The ocean absorbs CO2 emissions | that are released from fossil fuels, | causing seawater to acidify | and aragonite to become unsaturated,” 26), and lyricism (as in certain threads of seamless sound like the “bald eagles and bobolinks, bobcats and harrier hawks, / herons,” of “prayer | suit,” 32).

Tierney starts generating hypotheses of meaning by juxtaposing signifieds and references in the table of contents, which lists “urf” as a first title and “earth | urf” as a ninth. “urf” is what the earth becomes when she figures—as she will explain in the third and last section of the book, “islands”—an “idea of the planetary, an Earth, based on the island alone?” (p. 56)¹¹ “‘Urf’ is Earth’s capitalist self. It’s a play on turf/territory/astroturf,” she wrote in an email dated July 30, 2023, anticipating that she would extend “this idea as a space of possible resistance” in her next collection, where she describes it as “the alter ego of the Earth,” “the rowdy sibling to Earth, a turf of intentionality with astropotential.” In the prospective collection, which might veer to a more resilient attitude, she connects *urf* with another new coinage of *a year*, the “islandary,”

“which is not the direct opposite to planetary,” she clarifies. “Rather, I’m criticising the term ‘planetary’ as a universalising concept that reduces islands and oceans as minor sites in contrast to continents and countries that dominate political, economic geographical concerns on a global scale. The islandary instead argues that we should recentre our perceptions and focus on the island—and by extension on the ocean—as a centre for human consciousness.” Thus, in the table of contents, the “island” refers to her concept of an “I-land,” which, further within the text, hints at an individuality that may survive as a collectivity. Finally, five “carbon sink” poems evolve in the table of contents into a final “carbon sick,” which declares the book to have been “a minor exercise in the care and feeding of a nightmare” and poses the final question of “how to love with concussive tenderness” (93) even the less than lovable, the damaged.

The first “carbon sink,” which opens the collection, is an essay that states the terms of the research—its occasion, its aim, and its method. The long poem was “excited by a strip of yellow plastic, snarled in the branches of a maidenhair tree” outside Tierney’s window (11). As a “smut hound,” the poet wants to “unurf” questions like “how to write a sustainable encounter with dead sea monsters and plastic without fabricating disgust?” and “how to navigate unseen ecologies with microscopic life forms seen suspended only in underwater photographs?” More incisively, she asks “how to carbonise poetry? [...] can poetry become a carbon sink, absorbing excess CO₂, instead of releasing it through performance or publication?” muses Tierney, and “how to write that poem?” (11-12).

The groping, progressive attempts at an answer that surface in the following poems, essays, and photos shape an aesthetics that understands vulnerability—a term I am using to include disease, pathology, deterioration, decline, decomposition, infestation, proliferation of viruses, evil, waste—as the terrain of survival and the material for an art of survival. Assuming a

radically honest (and potentially posthumanist) posture, Tierney recognizes that cruelty is “visceral in our society,” that it consolidates “boundaries, exclusions, and narrow inclusions,” and that it needs to be opposed by empathetic and kind thinking, which may be “intersectional, interdisciplinary and migratory.” Humans need a critique without judgment, she insists and recommends “Active listening without interruption” (104). Such fluid and receptive thinking is the extent to which the agency of a poetics and an aesthetics of vulnerability can be stretched and can substitute for the ineffective “sentimentality that mourns a world that has not yet passed” (104). It may recognize, and reflect, the agency of what Tierney has recently called, in her last chapbook, “the Tiny,” referring particularly to lichens, which she offers as a possible model for the organization of a human(e) collectivity. Ecopoetry, then, can be a restoration of the act of reading both the things of this world and the texts humans draw about them. “Surface reading” starts from seeing what one looks *at*—instead of *through*, or *behind*, or *beneath*—and recognizes the creative power of the minuscule and discarded. In this sense, this latest chapbook culminates with the attempt to recover the ability to wonder at and praise what Jorie Graham has called “creation,” which she advocated for in her 2012 interview with *EarthLines* (39).

One example from Tierney’s *a year of misreading the wildcats* may suffice to round up my discourse by pointing out the poet’s suggestion that the entertaining of a condition of crisis may be a way of exploiting the healing potential that paradoxically lies at the heart of lack, or fault. In her essay on the remediated landfill of Spectacle Island, Boston, she says that “the island’s spectacular rejuvenation” can now be taken as an “allegory of chronic rebirth.” She envisions waste as “the continuation of life by other means.” In an analogy with writing, she creates “compostable poems from different assemblages as if to foster an aesthetics of recycling the waste I shamelessly generate. I remember one disaster, I forget another. I rely on dust to

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delay hemorrhaging. I tell poetronauts I admire: textual collage is another form of waste management. How to metabolise the partial, the fragment, the sheen of oil? How to mine the urf with birds spilling bottle caps?” In the same, fifth “carbon sink” of November 21, 2017, though, she proposes “to plant something more monstrous to grow” (84). Her aesthetics of vulnerability warns her to keep “Slow disaster” as “a grain in the voice” that “remains unspeakable” (44) because “Bioremediation would signal the end of our tacit complicity in urban ecological violence, and I prefer to feel thickened with guilt. The ethics of bodies in wanting contamination. Let the oil become sentient and call me to venom” (44).¹² Tierney prefers to focus on sites that have not yet undergone renovation because, she writes, she is interested in “the ways that wildernesses retake the borders of human habitation” (44), in “the persistence of nature to reclaim the built environment despite its bruising” (essay “waste | nature,” 42), with the same microscopic, deep-time strategy of the lichens she would explore in *looking at the Tiny*. In Tierney’s vulnerable vision, the nonhuman model persists, but the delusion of the human capability to avoid loss through resilience perishes, as these lines from “earth | urf” indicate: “How to algae poems / that crust desperation / for glasshouse seas?” (26). The following scream and cursing the poet performs as a personal “radical act” (26), verging on onomatopoeia (“eeeeaaaaaaaaaagh! / eeeeeaaaaaaaaaagh! / eeeeeaaaaaaaaaagh!”, 28), is followed by a very cautious conclusion, more clearly ironic than uncertain, or ambiguous, in tone:

What keeps people alive?

(Some scientists are indicating

we should make plans

to adapt to a 4C world.)

Cool (28)

The photographic language in *a year of misreading the wildcats* can be said to align with the same aesthetics of vulnerability, thus making the book a photo-text, in which the images integrate with the verbal texts in a complex ecosystem of signification. In her class visit, Tierney disclosed that the book's design was entirely her own work and that "each text, photo, and caption refers to another." When I asked her how precisely, she admitted that she could not remember the relationality she was following in composing the book but was happy with this because she never means to control the reading process of her audience, in the same way as she does not like her own reading process to be controlled.¹³ She referred to Lyn Hejinian's conception of the "open text," which allows for multiple interpretations to avoid the closure of meaning and to involve the reader in its making ("The Rejection of Closure," 2000).¹⁴ In the book, Tierney declares that she deliberately chose to use a Polaroid instant camera because of its instability as a medium that is not useful for long-term preservation (46), because of its only partial efficacy in documenting environmental justice (103) and because of its immediate efficacy in keeping her alert to her complicity in environmental damaging. Funnily enough, she has extended this utility to the book format. A student asked her why she devised it in such an uncommon, big, and square form, which is so difficult to carry (he jokingly asked: "Why doesn't it fit into my pocket?"). Tierney justified her choice with her will to make the reader feel the unease, the discomfort of coping with—i.e., "carry"—the environmental crisis.

The Polaroids make the first impact in the volume because a composition of them figures as its cover. As the copyright page cites, it is authored by the poet herself, and "It's a 4x4 grid of Polaroids in color or black and white. Each photograph depicts an urban or bioremediated

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landscape, such as Three Mile Island, Petty Island, Penn's Landing, Delaware Oil Plant, Spectacle Island, Willow Steam Plant, and Woodlands Cemetery." Many of these sites are located in Philadelphia or Pennsylvania, places that the poet has learned to think of as "home" at a certain point in her life. More from the paratextual interview explains how the photographic object is, again, a "weak" document, both a "useful and useless object of witnessing" (103). It may "record historical and contemporary ephemera" and "identify environmental change," but it will never be able to render what is outside the picture and may be more relevant, because "the limits of the medium elide/evade/refuse the possibility of the Big Picture" (103). As an example, Tierney reminds of the "violent history of urban redevelopment" that tainted "Philadelphia's infamous concrete silos on Grays Ferry" (103). Because it seemed to Tierney "that sometimes what is outside the white frame might be more interesting in the picture," she included the back of one of the images with her footprint (email of July 31, 2023). Moreover, she meant for the poems and captions to perform the exteriorities of that frame space. "They're doing the work that the images themselves just cannot do" (July 31, 2023). Accordingly, in the caption of her footprint photo, the petronaut wonders, meta-photographically, "how to shoot the environmental image outside the frame" (55). To my question about the influences on her photographic musings, while writing *wildcats*, she answered that she was not especially thinking of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, which is the first reference that might come to mind for some. Rather than critiquing Barthes's idea of the *noème* of photography, the "it-has-been" that functions as a phenomenological synthesis, the recognition from a photographic image of the past reality of a thing or an event, Tierney was exploring Errol Morris's vision of photography, specifically in *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), which "had a huge impact on how I see the photograph. *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) is a fantastic documentary, which also clearly invokes

Camera Lucida in parts. In particular, Morris explores the unseen violence behind the photographs at Abu Ghraib. My own visual illiteracy shocked me, and I resolved to approach the photographic frame as space between visual knowledge and the unknowability of the subject” (email of May 24, 2024).

An essay on her own Polaroids that figures on page 46 explains how, as an antiquated medium, Tierney’s original Polaroid Sun 600 involves a “retro-aesthetics” that determines reception; that is, it can turn obsolescence into “a renewable resource.” The limited potential of an aesthetics of vulnerability is the envisioning of the resurgence of waste into nourishment for the futurities the poet is trying to imagine. The added value of her vulnerable aesthetics as compared to a resilient ideology is, again, that of reflecting more adequately the sharing of responsibilities so that a hasty, impatient self-absolution may not slacken one’s engagement in environmental action. “Perhaps the superobjective of my images,” writes the poet-photographer, “is the way that analogue photograph can problematise our notion of ecological restoration as a progressive continuity from untouched wilderness to industrial modernity to ecological degradation and finally to landscape regeneration” (46). Being an “environmentally damaging medium” (because “each cartridge contains an unrecyclable battery and undeveloped film to produce only eight pictures”), “Its ecological unfriendliness sinks guilt every time I take a picture,” she confesses (46). So, “the Polaroid as a product of oil and a culture of convenience feels suited to confront the politics of urban ecologies and their inhabitants,” contributing to our realization of the “conceptual instability of words like ‘ecology’ and ‘nature’” (47). This position begs for further justification, which I asked Tierney to provide. When I questioned the advantage of using an environment-damaging medium for the purpose of keeping awake the consciousness of human complicity in the damage, she answered that there are few or no things humans

normally use in their daily life that do not cause damage to the environment (MA class, May 4, 2024). Her deliberate use of the Polaroid is an intentional aim of her rhetoric of vulnerability: it points to the quotidian, uninterrupted operativity of humans' lives in the environmental crisis and exposes the inextricable and inevitable effects of many present lifestyles.

On the other side of its avowal, and appreciation, of conceptual instability, the aesthetics of vulnerability of Tierney's Polaroids offers the rich apprehension of sensual perception, which posthumanism acknowledges as a proper, affective, notion of cognition, capable of relating to what Braidotti dubbed "earth others" (2013, 49) in a more ethical approach. "someday," writes Tierney of her in-progress collection

in the placetime of climate change has rendered us literally into plants and plant forms
evolve into people. urf is not a utopia or dystopia, but an atopia—unsettled space, an
imagined planttime of pollution and protestation in the futurepast and futurepresent
where astroturf meets grass, plastic bottles are wedged into trees, the acidification of the
oceans has produced entropy and new lifeforms [...] what is a community-based practice
when the community does not yet exist. how will the human remain entangled with future
kin... a place-based practice [that] commits us to collaborative world-building with
environmental agents (plant, animal, microbes, fungi, landscapes, humans, and matter)
for the purpose of imagining possible worlds of desire and thrivance (email of July 30,
2023).¹⁵

Tierney's ecopoetics of vulnerability also reminds of what Laura-Gray Street and Ann Fisher-Wirth wrote: in a sense, all poetry is ecopoetry because "[p]oetry returns us in countless ways to the world of our senses" (2013, xxvii) and that "ecopoetry enacts through language the manifold relationship between the human and the other-than-human world" (2013, xxx). Tierney writes:

“the urf is more flamboyant and prodigal. its sticky slimy islandness encourages pathways and webbing,” declaring that hers is “a story of dirt,” that “repetition is respiration,” and concludes: “so here I am. a lexicon of utterances. a child of mud” (email of July 30, 2023). This posture is reinforced in *looking at the Tiny*, where a single exclamation, “wow,” becomes the cipher of her will to “observe, connect, do,” that is, of being physically present in nature: “look here,” the poet invites in the central and core pages of the chapbook, “I stooped and peered at Tiny” (22). And she just adds, in an elemental sound utterance: “wow.” (23) This “untrammelled contact point between the mind and nature,” to repeat Graham’s words for the same belief, turns mindful attention into empathetic participation, which makes the poet’s body feel “transformed into tubulars of hard light” (6).

On the page, *The Tiny* looks like an essay informed by scholarship that ranges from posthuman studies to scientific literature on lichens, from literary and biographical references to disability studies interspersed with rare and short lines (and catalogs) of poetry. The prose is a seamless flow of deftly modeled sentences, which slide into one another by means of the lack of capitalization. The register is colloquial but accurate in its use of scientific terms and slightly twisted and expressive vocabulary. By taking inspiration from the Beat poet Lew Welch and his “Springtime in the Rockies, Lichen” and reciting the mantra of his invitation to “Observe, connect, do” (“Philosophy,” 1973, 115), Tierney reveals the unassuming form of resilience that lies hidden at the core of her acceptance of vulnerability: she identifies, and merges, the human with the nonhuman instead of using the nonhuman as a source of knowledge. Knowledge is a form of power, because the desire to understand has traditionally been prompted, in Western culture, by a will to control and use. Stopping before the surface of things, assuming the notion of limit and self-limitation, is to respect them and give them priority as peer organisms, forms of

life. It means envisioning the human as a form of participation in, instead of appropriation of, the nonhuman. By assuming Welch's paradoxically (and "wildly") optimistic vision of lichens as both "bioindicators of the presence of air pollution" (20) and "farms of sustainable husbandry" (1), "destructively hopeful" rock-crumblers and cosmic creators Tierney enacts the tenuous resilience of her vulnerable vision. By defining Welch's representations of lichens as an embodiment of Donna Haraway's *naturecultures* (2003, 334), Tierney walks the opposite path of an exclusively resilient stance: instead of bringing nature closer to culture, she leads culture back to its origins in nature. The risk of hyperintellectualism of Tierney's previous more militant (and resilient) experimentalism gives way to a more candid "abandonment to the nature of things" (Emerson 1983, 459).¹⁶

Similarly, about her photographic language in *a year*, Tierney affirms that "the Polaroid is really a document in time, a means to capture ephemera" (46), and, in an island poem, that "my Polaroids become objects for dreaming islands, which mouth their own names" (57). The captions to her instant photographs are often more lyrical than experimental, more impressionistic than conceptual, as if she were letting go of the strategic, resilient, structuring (but abstract) force of discourse to embrace the force of an emotional, embodied response to the landscape—as if she *were*, in fact, dwelling in the vulnerable affective space of crisis, which is typically unstable, fleeting, ephemeral, frail, and perishable (and material). Tierney's photos point to the Tiny's wordless eloquence of her Mad lichen, to the power of its materiality to conduct life through spoilage, ruin, pathology, and death, to assume fragility as fecundity, creativity as knowledge. Her captions go along with their signifying intention, as in the "skeleton flower" that "spoke its silent emergency" "not far from Three Mile Island" (30); or "the trees, the sun" that "conversed in complexity" in the Polaroid on page 45; or the petronaut that "listened: a

melody of trains had fossilized the wind” (17), or “crunched grit and glass against the film in place of language” (75). “I love this image,” the poet says of her “inadequate” picture of the Philadelphia silo, “the overgrowth underscores the kind of environmental reclamation that neglect can foster. Nature is relentless and loving” (103). Tierney’s last words, in *looking at the Tiny: Mad lichen on the surfaces of reading*, bespeak her awareness that the distributed agency among all the entities of our ecosystems enacts, and fosters, the embeddedness and permanence of crisis in the ordinary and that this may be our shared, collective way of cherishing hope in living: “we’re not living in the anthropocene. it’s the lichencene. and lichens’ power lies in their surface spreading of small catastrophes” (3).

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¹ The intra-actions of Karen Barad's agential realism indicate an agency that is "not an inherent property of an individual or human" but "a dynamism of material forces" (2007, 141).

² I share Jorie Graham's position on the culturalist debate of our supposedly "constructed" notion of "nature," as she has expressed it in an interview by Sharon Blackie for *EarthLines* (2012). When Blackie asks her whether writing poetry is an intellectual or a grounding experience, for her, which comes from her head or her direct experience of the natural world, Graham answers: "Well, I am not all that involved, ultimately, with critical theory, to be honest. I have an abiding belief that an untrammelled contact point between the mind and nature is possible. I just believe it. I do not feel it can or should be a part of the conversation at this point in our history—our emergency" (39). She seems to adhere to the meaning of the term of poets who "describe, try to render phenomenologically 'real', Nature, as we have thought of it, in what one would have to call our 'traditional' sense of the planet we share with other species"—those who are "trying to awaken readers to what is actually 'there'" (36), because—as she aptly maintains—"Nature cannot become an abstraction." It should rather be experienced by means of "an awakened sensation," and known by means of "its attendant awakened consciousness" (39).

³ By "posthuman turn" I particularly refer to the way theorists such as Cary Wolfe and Rosi Braidotti have radically reconceived the way of thinking human subjectivity, suggesting a decentering of the human transcendent and privileged subject on the ground of its "embodiment and embeddedness [...] in not just its biological but also its technological world" (Wolfe 2010, xv). Wolfe has specified the how that is especially relevant to my research focus on ecopoetry: a "rethinking of our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including [our] normal perceptual modes and affective states [...] by recontextualizing them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of 'bringing forth a world'" (2010, xxv). Braidotti's "critical posthumanities" are also constructed upon an ontology of "the radical immanence, i.e. the primacy of intelligent and self-organizing matter," whose posthuman subject is described as "relational, embodied and embedded," on the basis of the claim of a continuity between body and mind, nature and culture (2018, 1). This continuity has been at the center of affect theory and of literary cognitive studies in general. Together with the new materialisms, including object-oriented theory and actor-network theory (ANT), they have been honing a new vision of how we know and intra-act with all the entities of ecosystems.

⁴ Trigger warning. What follows includes sexual violence and physical violence. Bryson refers to Gary Snyder's description "of commercial land developers as rapists who say to the land 'Spread your legs,'" and to Denise Levertov's "description of the earth as 'a beaten child or a captive animal' who lies 'waiting the next blow'" (3).

⁵ I am here referring to the consciousness produced by theorists of Modernism such as James Breslin, Marjorie Perloff and Charles Altieri—and by a certain current of Modernist poetry which later evolved into L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry—that derives from a reading of Jacques Derrida in the 1980s and of Ludwig Wittgenstein in the 1990s, and teaches to admire "the aesthetic blooms of textuality and language theory and devalue referential reality."

⁶ Les Murray distinguishes between “NarrowSpeak,” the “greyer, flatter speech of functional prose and rational dominance, which governs Western discourse,” and “the Wholespeak of poetry [which] is a mode of communication, which is pre-verbal and imaginative as well as bodily and expressive. It ‘models the fullness of life, and also gives its object presence’” (“Poems and Poesies” 27, quoted in Feddersen 90-111, 97).

⁷ Tierney refers to the concept of deviance in more ways in her poetry and in her talk to the MA class, which opens a further space for imagining vulnerability as a paradoxical source of resilience. In *looking at the Tiny*, reflecting upon poet Lew Welch’s mental suffering and “final act of self-annihilation” (17), Tierney presents Madness (intentionally capitalized) as the attitude of observing, connecting and doing—which is the mantra of the meditative connection to nature she recites in the chapbook—and defines it as “creative expression” and “aesthetic difference” (18), the “counter-knowledge” prevented by social and political systems and institutions. In her talk to my class, she implicitly equaled play to madness by saying that it “doesn’t require consistency, it’s deviation and process.” Moreover, she mentioned “mad ecopoetics,” which unites disability and the environment.

⁸ Bernadette Mayer created her first-published list of Writing Experiments with the members of the St. Mark’s church poetry project writing workshop in 1971-1975.

⁹ Among the characters of the book’s narrative, the *cosmonauts* are the only ones whose name has not been invented. Here is Tierney’s comment on this, from an email message of July 30, 2023: “Cosmonauts is an English word (although it typically refers to a Russian astronaut, but I used it in the book to gesture to a broader cosmological space in which earth species exist).” About the *carbonauts*, she writes: “In my interpretation, carbonauts describes every single human being on the planet at this time of history in which fossil fuels have penetrated every aspect of our daily lives, economic lives, and political lives. Extending it further, our insatiable hunger for fossil fuels penetrates even our bodies—here I am thinking about how pollution infects our bodies, our blood cells, and molecules so that we become molecularly embedded into our fossil fuel infrastructures” (July 30, 2023). And about the *petronauts*, she adds: “Petronauts takes this one step further but explicitly describes the human in the context of Western petroleum cultures which has enabled the kinds of ‘democratic freedoms’ and mobilities that we see in places like the US, NZ, Australia, UK, and Europe. I wrote this book in Philadelphia, so I was very much thinking about how the oil-refining industries there and throughout the US has reshaped the human and human experience in nuanced ways” (July 30, 2023).

¹⁰ Molly Maguire was an Irish widow who in the 1840s initiated the “Anti-landlord Agitators” movement of protest against English landlords who had tried to steal land from the people. Many Irish workers moved to the coal region of eastern Pennsylvania during of the huge migration to the US in the mid-19th century in hope of finding better work conditions and treatment. Tierney is probably referring to the Pennsylvania coal miners who joined the Irish and English *Molly Maguires* secret society; some of them were eventually convicted of murder and executed in 1877 and 1878.

¹¹ Tierney’s volume is divided into three sections that do not figure in the table of contents: *urf*, *islands* and *gyrotexts*. About the meaning of “gyrotext” Tierney has written to me that “Gyrotexts describe the way that commercial, digital, marketing, and pop culture language relating to plastics, climate change, and fossil fuels constantly repeat and rotate across different media. So this section takes language from early New Zealand and American newspapers, advertisements, films (*The Arrival*, *Battletruck*, for example), television shows (*Twilight Zone*), and commercial plastic journals) to consider how the language just circulates — much like the gyres in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. I was trying to break down the language just as plastic breaks down in our ocean gyres. The language breaks down but never full disappears. It just becomes cloudier and cloudier. I also apply OULIPO N+7 rule (and in variations) to various clichés in order to further break semantic sense. Again, what do we do with the building blocks of language when, like micro plastics, when their functionalities have been fragmented and rendered useless. Both micro plastics and nonsensical language exceed our capacity to recover, recycle, and repurpose” (email of July 30, 2023).

¹² Bioremediation can be defined as the use of living organisms to remove contaminants, pollutants, or unwanted substances from soil or water.

¹³ The relationality can be perceived in certain sequences of poem and photo and caption—and in in their intertextuality and cross-references—as on pages 32-33.

¹⁴ “The Rejection of Closure” was originally written as a talk and given at 544 Natoma Street, San Francisco, on April 17, 1983, and later included in *Writing/ Talks*, edited by Bob Perelman (Southern Illinois UP, 1985), and, in a revised form including suggestions from Barrett Watten, in *Poetics Journal* 4: “Women & Language” (May 1984).

¹⁵ Here, Tierney is using the word “community” in a different sense than the community of scholars and poets she was referring to when answering my student’s question about the potential and limits of her experimental style. Here, she seems to include an a-topian, intra-species community.

¹⁶ My reference is evidently provocative, and Tierney will likely *not* like it. But I do think that Emerson should be reconsidered from an ecocritical point of view, through a close reading not only of his essays but also of his poetry, which appears at times less guarded than his prose by his militant transcendentalism. This page from “The Poet,” for example, offers food for more nuanced ecocritical thoughts, as in the sage of Concord’s conception of insight as a “sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms... The path of things is silent” (1983, 459).