

Lorine Niedecker's "Lake Superior": Articulating Landscape Through Textual Collage

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My thoughts this morning will focus on the long poem Niedecker titled "Lake Superior." It was first published in the journal *Arts in Society* in 1967 and it was then included in Niedecker's 1968 collection of poems, *North Central*. This poem has been called "some of the purest Objectivist work [Niedecker] ha[s] ever done" (Peters 208) and it's one of my personal favorites. The thoughts I want to share with you this morning center around two questions. First, what was happening along the Lake Superior shoreline during the era of Niedecker's visit? Secondly, how does the collage form Niedecker uses in this poem impact the way we understand landscapes?

We'll start with some history. In the summer of 1966, the poet Lorine Niedecker and her husband, Al Millen, spent seven days circumnavigating Lake Superior in their Buick. Heading north from their home in Wisconsin, they caught Highway 35 into Michigan's Upper Peninsula, crossed into Canada at Sault Ste. Marie, followed the shoreline down through Minnesota, and then took the expressway back to Blackhawk Island. This route is often referred to as the "Circle Tour," and it was advertised heavily by local tourism agencies in the 1960s (Bessert). When Lorine and Al traversed it, it was still a relatively new journey: the International Bridge at Sault Ste. Marie had opened to traffic less than four years earlier. Lorine had married Al three years earlier at the age of 60. This trip was especially significant because her previous job as a cleaning woman at the Fort Atkinson Hospital hadn't provided her with the surplus income necessary for travel. She was hoping to produce a long poem from the journey, and she mentioned in a letter to her friend Cid Corman that the trip would be "a great delight if I can make the poem" (quoted in Penberthy 69).

As Margot Peters notes in her recent biography, Niedecker spent months eagerly researching in preparation for this drive around Lake Superior and the poem she was hoping to glean from the experience. She took "the bus to the Milwaukee library to read about Great Lakes geology, she read Harlan Henthorne Hatcher's history of the Great Lakes region at the Fort Atkinson library. She read the memoirs of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who was commissioned by the United States government to locate the source of the Mississippi River... [she took] notes on Azoic Time, Pre-Cambrian Time, and the Paleozoic Era; on place names and French explorers" (Peters 205). She jotted down places of interest along the shoreline, including Michigan's Pictured Rocks, Minnesota's Split Rock Lighthouse, and Wisconsin's Apostle Islands.

Unfortunately, the trip itself didn't provide the wide-open views of gleaming water Lorine had been hoping for. Her awful eyesight combined with fast highway travel led her to complain:

What I didn't foresee was that the highway doesn't always run right next to the lake...and that you can travel almost entirely around Superior...without finding more than a couple of accessible beaches....And you're whizzing along the highway with a glimpse of beach but there's traffic behind and you simply continue to whizz. (quoted in Peters 206)

Perhaps because her own experience of the lake seemed incomplete, or perhaps because her pre-trip research so significantly shaped the way she viewed the Lake Superior region, Niedecker chose to collage small fragments of other people's descriptions of Lake Superior into her poem. The oldest fragment of text appears in the third section of the poem. Niedecker writes:

Radisson:
“a laborinth of pleasure”
this world of the Lake (232)

The second line of this stanza is lifted from a description of the Lake Superior region written by Pierre Esprit Radisson, a seventeenth-century French-Canadian fur trader. Translated into English sometime around 1669, Radisson’s account of his travels was intended to garner support for Hudson’s Bay Company:

We embarked ourselves on the delightfulest lake of the world. . . .the country was so pleasant, so beautiful & fruitfull. . . .the Europeans fight for a rock in the sea against one another, or for a sterill land and horrid country. . . .What conquest would that bee att little or no cost, what laborinth of pleasure should millions of people have, instead that millions complaine of misery & poverty! (Radisson 66)

Niedecker has extracted part of Radisson’s description and collaged it into her own text. This collage technique also characterizes the work of many of the poets Niedecker read and admired—Zukofsky, Pound, and perhaps most prominently, Marianne Moore. Niedecker deeply admired Moore’s work. When Basil Bunting referred to Niedecker as “the best living poetess,” Lorine remarked, “Sometime I must tell Basil about Marianne!” (Peters 234). There’s an important difference between Moore’s collage work and Niedecker’s, however. Moore rarely makes the sources of her quotes clear. Instead, the fragments of text she chooses to collage into her poems seamlessly blend with her own voice. In Niedecker’s “Lake Superior”—and I would argue in Niedecker’s work more generally—other people are granted a larger presence. Not only are their words collaged into her writing, but Niedecker deliberately names them and often treats them as characters in her poems.

For instance, as Niedecker’s “Lake Superior” poem progresses, we move from Radisson and Marquette’s seventeenth-century expeditions to the 1820 journey of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and John Doty. Schoolcraft and Doty were appointed by the U.S. government to trace the Mississippi back to its source and learn about the Ojibwe inhabitants of the western Great Lakes. Describing the Pictured Rocks along Lake Superior’s southern shore, Niedecker writes:

Schoolcraft left the Soo. . .
[. . .]
Passed peaks of volcanic thrust
Hornblende in massed granite
Wave-cut Cambrian rock
painted by soluble mineral oxides
wave-washed and the rains
did their work and a green
running from copper (235)

Despite the great detail of this passage, Niedecker herself never saw the Pictured Rocks. Margot Peters notes that Lorine and Al were “told at Pictured Rocks National Lakeside Park that the best view was from [the] water, [so] they bought postcards instead” (206). If we look through the nearly 260 single-spaced pages of typed notes Niedecker took in preparation for writing her poem, it becomes apparent that the poem’s description of the Pictured Rocks is drawn primarily from historical texts describing this geological formation. Niedecker’s notes on the Lake Superior volume of *The American Lake Series* mention that Radisson’s travelogue includes a description of the Pictured Rocks from sometime around 1650. A few pages later, we find she’s

interested in Schoolcraft and Doty's depiction of this place. Niedecker chose to transcribe a fragment of Doty's account:

12 miles in extent 'graywacke, or sand and pebbles cemented by lime; and the minerals and other matter between the strata have run out, and given the rocks various and very singular colours. A green like that running from copper is seen in several places. The appearance of iron is more frequent. These rocks are generally from 2 to 300 ft. high. They present the most appalling spectacle I ever witnessed. From the deep caverns underneath a roar like that of cannon is continually reverberated, occasioned by the waves rolling in. In passing under them the sensations exceed those excited on viewing the Cataract of Niagara. ("Lake Superior Notes 2," Niedecker)

Doty's phrase "a green like that running from copper" has been collaged into Niedecker's poem. In effect, Niedecker's portrayal of Lake Superior in 1966 includes a fragment of Doty's portrayal of the region, dated almost 150 years previous. The poem's point of view is therefore not stabilized in one chronological era. Instead, taking into account all the journals and texts Niedecker gathered information from, the view of the lake presented in this poem spans more than three centuries. This brings us back to one of the questions I began with: How does Niedecker's collage technique impact how we understand landscapes? I would like to suggest that the landscape we encounter in the poem "Lake Superior" is actually a collaboratively viewed landscape, composed from numerous people's visions of the region. The lakeshore represented in this poem is therefore a temporally layered place, a place described by numerous travelers over the duration of multiple centuries.

In fact, the way in which history layers upon a geographical space is a central concern throughout "Lake Superior." In the final section of the poem, Niedecker's voice emerges, describing Sandy Lake in Minnesota:

I'm sorry to have missed

Sand Lake

My dear one tells me

we did not

We watched a gopher there ("Lake Superior" 237)

Sandy Lake was a location Schoolcraft mentioned in his writings, and for that reason, Niedecker was sorry to miss it. In her notes, as in the poem, she introduces a temporal layer between their current trip and Schoolcraft's journey: "altho Al says we were at Sandy three years ago, he remembers watching a gopher there" ("Lake Superior Country," Niedecker 324). From Schoolcraft's 1820 account of Sandy Lake to Al's recounting of their visit three years previous to Niedecker's present discussion of the place, the stanza suggests the geographical location of Sandy Lake is embedded with multiple layers of historical narrative.

At points, the poem's collage of voices blurs these layers, making the distinction between present and past views of landscape difficult to determine. For example, in a section towards the end of the poem, Niedecker writes:

Inland then

beside the great granite

gneiss and the schists

to the redolent pondy lakes'

lilies, flag and Indian reed

"through which we successfully

passed” (236)

At the beginning of this stanza, we assume the travelers turning “inland...beside the great granite” are Al and Lorine in July of 1966, following the highway inland as they circumnavigate the water. After the pause, however, we realize the travelers are in fact Schoolcraft and Doty, progressing by boat in 1820, passing through reeds and lilies. The poem is deliberately structured to blur chronology. Niedecker’s view of the landscape suddenly breaks open to expose the view of an earlier traveler, the formal structure of the poem suggesting our current interpretations and representations of place are always built on previous ones. Understanding a place is a collaborative, trans-historical project.

And this brings us back to the question I started with: What was happening along the Lake Superior shoreline during the era of Niedecker’s visit? Lorine and Al’s vacation took place in the midst of a national effort to define the Lake Superior shoreline. The National Park Service had spent 1957 and 1958 conducting the Great Lakes Shoreline Recreation Area Survey. This survey identified remaining “opportunities” for recreation along Lake Superior, attempting to strike a balance between the tourism industry, the preservation of natural landscapes, and—to a lesser degree—the preservation of historically significant sites (National Park Service). Looking back at the report produced from this survey, *Our Fourth Shore*, we see numerous private and public interests competing to define this landscape. Should it be considered wilderness? Or a tourist destination? Land available for industry? In many ways, to define the landscape was to claim it. Then, in 1964, just two years before Lorine and Al’s trip, Congress passed the Wilderness Act. It stated:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. (PL 88-577)

In its effort to conserve areas of wilderness, the act effectively created a sharp binary between landscapes marked by human presence and pristine, natural places (Cronon 39). Congress declared the Pictured Rocks the first National Lakeshore on October 15, 1966, just three months after Lorine and Al’s visit. The Apostle Islands on Lake Superior’s southern shore—which Niedecker mentions in her research—would be declared a National Lakeshore just a few years later in 1970. This was the era of defining land. It was an era that might be characterized by what J.L. Austin has referred to as speech acts (Austin 6), the ability to bring something into being by naming it. Areas of Lake Superior’s shoreline became “historic” or “national landmarks” or a “park” because words made them so. During the period of Niedecker’s trip and the composition of her “Lake Superior” poem, there were high stakes for how this region was articulated.

Unlike the Wilderness Act, which attempted to erase humanity’s mark on the landscape and unlike the reports focusing solely on the land’s future value in tourism or recreation, Niedecker insists that a complete vision of the lakeshore requires a deep understanding of human history. The layers of narrative that build on the poem’s shoreline are a poetic forerunner of what the environmental historian William Cronon calls “historical wilderness” (38). It seems to me that that narrative technique Niedecker uses in “Lake Superior”—her use of collage and her reliance on the journals of previous travelers through the region—is the poetic version of a historical landscape. Describing the Apostle Islands area of Lake Superior’s southern shore, Cronon argues that a place cannot be understood if it is separated from the stories contained within it. He insists that physical landscapes inevitably bear the marks of human history, much as Niedecker’s poem bears the marks of various historical narratives. Discussing an island just

off the Wisconsin shore, Cronon suggests that what most people assume is pristine wilderness in the Apostle Islands is in fact an area shaped by a human past. He writes:

Most visitors today disembark on a wooden pier on the eastern side of the island, and then hike more than a mile to reach the lovely brownstone lighthouse at the island's northern tip, constructed way back in 1881....Gazing out at the lake from atop the tower, it is easy to imagine that this is a lone oasis of civilization in the midst of deep wilderness.

But the path you walk to reach this lighthouse is in fact a former county road. If you look in the right place you can still find an ancient automobile rusting amid the weeds....Nature alone cannot explain this landscape. You need history too. (39)

Similarly, Niedecker's poem provides us with a textual articulation of the layers of history contained within the Lake Superior region. The voices she collages into her poem may bridge centuries, but as Niedecker told Cid Corman ten days before leaving to drive around the lake, "we are always inhabiting more than one realm of existence—but they all fit in if the art is right" (quoted in Penberthy 76).

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