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# Reading the public comment : the keystone XL pipeline and future of environmental writing

Eric Mitchell Siegel  
*University of Iowa*

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READING THE PUBLIC COMMENT: THE KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE AND  
FUTURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL WRITING

by

Eric Mitchell Siegel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of  
Arts degree in English  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Michael Hill

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Eric Mitchell Siegel

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts  
degree in English at the May 2014 graduation.

Thesis Committee: \_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Hill, Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Tom Simmons

\_\_\_\_\_  
Peter Nazareth

Knowledge which goes so far as to accept horror in order to know it, reveals the horror of knowledge, its squalor, the discrete complicity which maintains it in relation with the most insupportable aspects of power.

Maurice Blanchot  
*The Writing of the Disaster*

Theory can be the very place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of theory's own operative principles is made accessible, and where theoretical categories, like all classificatory schemes, keep on being voided, rather than appropriated, reiterated, safeguarded.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha  
"Documentary Is/Not a Name"

A desire for a social, political dimension in writing...has meant, in recent years, a conception of writing *as* politics, not writing about politics...

Bruce Andrews  
"Poetry as Explanation, Poetry as Praxis"

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## CHAPTER I

Nebraska's Sandhills, a cattle ranching region of grass-stabilized sand dunes and inter-dunal valleys, stretches 20,000-square miles across the north-central part of this Great Plains state – the equivalent of four Connecticut<sup>1</sup>. It is the largest sand dune system in North America, and among the four largest on Earth. Despite its name, the region's riches – in eco-systems of ecology and economy – reside in water, not sand per se. Beneath the vast network of undulating sand dunes sprawls an equally vast hydrological network, including the largest freshwater aquifer in the world – the Ogallala aquifer, which supplies drinking water for eight states and about 30 percent of the groundwater used for irrigation in this country.<sup>2</sup> If geomorphology tells us to look at the relationship between topography and the geologic structures sustaining it – a surface and the infrastructure it's built upon-within – then to understand “the Sandhills” not just as a name and landscape but as a *place* represented in discourse and language, we need to understand the deep structures propping up the idea and image of

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\* A version of this paper was presented, in condensed form, at the 2013 American Studies Association (ASA) annual meeting, “Beyond the Logic of Debt, Toward an Ethics of Collective Dissent,” November, Washington D.C. A separate version of this paper was presented at the 2012 Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences (AESS) annual meeting, “Preparing for our Environmental Future,” June, Santa Clara U., Santa Clara, CA.

<sup>1</sup> A fact—expanded upon – in David A. Owen's *Like No Other Place: The Sandhills of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Bison Books, U Nebraska, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Sassoon, David. “Crude, Dirty, and Dangerous: The Dangers of Diluted Bitumen.” *New York Times* 21 Aug. 2012: A19. Print.

the Sandhills. They have been described, variously, as “fragile”<sup>3</sup> (for their rare sandy soil type – entisols), as “distinct” (home to 720 different plant species), as “mostly intact”<sup>4</sup> – and, as such, a place whose “ecosystem sensitivities” often dissuade cattle ranchers from overgrazing (so as to prevent erosion, ensuring sand-tolerant grass species their habitat). Very little of the Sandhills has been plowed (often, simply, because it’s impossible: we’re talking about *sand*, not *soil*).<sup>5</sup> For migratory birds – like the famed Sandhill crane – this ecosystem serves as “the central flyway,” a pathway link between critical habitat areas across the North American continent that these species depend on for survival.

One could argue – as many, as of this writing, are – that the region provides essential, critical ecosystem services (fresh drinking water, agricultural

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<sup>3</sup> This adjective and all the others quoted in this sentence come from "Sandhills (Nebraska)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation Inc., Inc., 14 May 2012. Web. 16 July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> “Intact,” at least, to the Euro-Americans who created a ‘working’ definition of a laboring landscape – an “intact” gaze manifested in the settlers who prospected the region, particularly in the mid nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, during the Homestead (1862) and Kinkaid (1904) Acts, if not also in the generation of settlers and cattle barons who followed in the wake of The Louisiana Purchase (1803). Note: the Town of O’Neill, Nebraska still preserves the law office of Moses Kinkaid.

<sup>5</sup> In a recent essay about the Sandhills, in the publication *Prairie Fire* (Nov. 2012), the author, William Beachly, comically alludes to Lieutenant G.K. Warren’s 1855 government report that “nowhere west of the 97<sup>th</sup> meridian would the soil and rainfall support continuous settlement...” in the Sandhills (5). Perhaps for the Anglo-European settlers, yes. And until the advent of irrigation technologies in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the Sandhills relied on natural springs (and spring-fed stream- and river-systems); freshwater from the Ogallala aquifer seeps through the porous sand and silt of the Sandhills, creating freshwater ecosystems in regions of Nebraska that, geologically, are not ‘part’ of the Ogallala aquifer – land that does not sit above the aquifer – but nonetheless exists in relation to it, linked by hydrological networks. The lesson: ecosystem “boundaries” are never so clean cut. How do you speak of a “region” then? How do you map an “ecosystem” then? The field of ecosystem geography – a sub-discipline of Physical Geography interested in categorizing the Earth into a “hierarchy of...finer-scale ecosystems” – takes up such questions, particularly in relation to cartography. (See Robert Bailey, *Ecosystem Geography* (New York: Springer, 2009)). See also the proliferating literature on bio-regionalism.



land, wildlife habitat, etc.), and should not be tinkered with *without* a guarantee that those services continue unimpeded. The Sandhills – its variegated mosaic of fertile wetlands and bone-dry semi-desert – serve as the central drainage basin for the Platte River, a river-system connecting the Continental Divide to the Mississippi River Valley. Hence why the Sandhills have been heralded as possessing “the largest and most intricate wetland ecosystem in the United States” (Owen 2). To discuss the Sandhills, then, is to discuss the Platte; and to discuss the Platte is to discuss the variety of regional identities – tied up in labor, ethnicity, race, Prairie politics (itself an amalgam of clashing ideologies), and natural resource politics – of the trans-Mississippi West. Bounded by its westernmost headwaters in the Rocky Mountains, the Platte drainage basin drains the snow and ice melt from Wyoming (where the North Platte begins) and Colorado (where the South Platte begins); the North and the South branches unite in western Nebraska, forming the Platte – which channels the waters through the Sandhills, linking up with the Missouri River, and ultimately draining into the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River. The Sandhills is as much connected to global trade networks – via Texas and Louisiana shipping ports – as it is a local tourist, recreation, and natural resource for aesthetic consumption and extraction industries.

TransCanada, the multi-billion dollar Canadian oil conglomerate, runs oil pipelines through the Great Plains. Its largest network of pipelines is collectively named the Keystone Pipeline. Proposed in 2005, approved in 2008 (by a

Presidential Permit under the George W. Bush Administration), and operating since 2010, it twists and tumbles over (and under) 2,151 miles of the North American continent – river crossings and disparate ecosystems from the Athabaskan Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada to the Midwestern oil refineries in Cushing, Oklahoma and Wood River and Patoka, Illinois – transporting 435,000 barrels a day of tarry oil. The Illinois refineries currently refine more gasoline per barrel than any other region in the U.S.

The conglomerate wants to build a second pipeline, diverting oil away from the Illinois refineries. The Keystone XL, as in, “Super Size,” or “Extra-Large,” would nearly dwarf the amount of crude oil the Keystone transports – the proposed “XL” pipeline would carry 830,000 barrels a day. Context here may help. One barrel of oil equals 42 gallons; one person typically consumes three gallons a day in the U.S.; and the nation consumes 28,000 barrels every two minutes.<sup>6</sup> TransCanada wants this second pipeline to bypass the Illinois refineries and descend directly down through the High Plains to the Gulf Coast, from Canada to Texas, where U.S. ports can then allow the Canadian company to export the oil – all of it. The oil industry is more interested in the lucrative international diesel markets – available through access to the Gulf Coast ports of trade – than in solely selling crude oil to the U.S.; in diverting crude oil from the Illinois gasoline refineries, TransCanada has greater chances of accumulating

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Statistics always lie’ – yes, perhaps, but for some proof of this particular truth, see Chris Jordan, *Running the Numbers: An American Self-Portrait* (New York: Prestel/Random House, 2009).

surplus capital from international petrochemical markets. The pipeline does not increase U.S. “energy security” or “energy independence,” as many of its pundits claim; it provides no oil to the U.S. but does provide exports to the global oil market;<sup>7</sup> it produces payments for a Canadian oil company and injects what many environmentalists call a ‘carbon bomb’<sup>8</sup> into the global atmosphere; it allows Gulf Coast refineries to produce diesel, but only a few of the refineries are American-owned<sup>9</sup> – all but ensuring that the profits are sent abroad. In short: no crude oil, no refined oil, no gasoline for the U.S. And while some argue the pipeline provides new jobs, one must also clarify the type. The project provides short-term employment – the necessary construction jobs to build the pipe. TransCanada estimates as many 20,000 short-term jobs (“Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement” 69); **an independent study from Cornell University researchers estimates the number to be closer to 2,000 temporary jobs.**<sup>10</sup> **The State Department estimates that the project will only create 35 jobs total** (“Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement” 69). Building the

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<sup>7</sup> Natural Resources Defense Council and Oil Change International. “Keystone XL Pipeline: Undermining U.S. Energy Security and Sending Tar Sands Overseas.” *Energy Facts* January 2012. Web. 18 June 2012.

<sup>8</sup> NASA climate scientist James Hansen coined the phrase.

<sup>9</sup> “TransCanada’s New Permit Still Threatens Nebraska’s Water and U.S. Energy Security.” *BOLD Nebraska* 3 May 2012. Web. *EcoWatch: Uniting the Voice of the Grassroots Environmental Movement*. Web. 18 Jun. 2012

<sup>10</sup> “Cornell GLI Study Finds Keystone XL Pipeline Will Create Few Jobs.” *Cornell Global Labor Institute*. Cornell University, January 2012. Web. 12 June 2012.

U.S. portion of the pipeline only guarantees the obsolescence of *future* U.S. pipeline jobs. Where there is construction, there is destruction.

The vast pipeline would travel through the Platte River drainage basin – literally. The pipes tear into the Sandhills, and it is here that the pipelines threaten to come into contact with the upper reaches of the decisive – and increasingly geo-politicized – Ogallala aquifer.<sup>11</sup> The aquifer is an extensive geologic formation spanning eight states and covering 174,000 square miles – again, the largest freshwater aquifer system in the world. It provides fresh drinking water for 1.5 million people.<sup>12</sup> And it’s responsible for irrigating the commercially grown monocrops that feed the nation and, to an extent, the world.<sup>13</sup> These would include soybeans and – the nonetheless inedible to humans – corn, harvested as feed for cattle in CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations), or for producing the high-fructose corn syrup products (sugar cereals, soft drink products, etc.), distributed throughout the world. The Ogallala Aquifer can at once be identified as something of a regional resource –

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<sup>11</sup> Ogallala – as in “the Ogallala Group” (a Miocene accumulation of stream- and wind-deposited outwash from the Rockies). Ogallala, the Nebraska town, was known as a rowdy cowboy stop where the Ogallala Group was described initially. See: Beachly, William. “In the Path of the Pipeline.” *Prairie Fire: The Progressive Voice of the Great Plains* Nov. 2012: 5. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, Jeffrey M., Marsh, Thomas L., and Williams, Jeffrey R. “Conserving the Ogallala Aquifer: Efficiency, Equity, and Moral Motives.” *Choices: The Magazine of Food, Farm, and Resource Issues* Feb. 2003: 15-18. Print.

<sup>13</sup> It’s ironic to say that this region is a “U.S.” agricultural supply; multi-national conglomerates like Monsanto, Cargill, and Syngenta farm much of the corn and soy, having bought out many former family farms and consolidated them into large patches of genetically-modified cropland. For a recent investigation of this decades-long developing phenomena, see Wil S. Hylton’s recent essay, “Broken Heartland: The Looming Collapse of Agriculture on the Great Plains.” *Harper’s Magazine* Jul. 2012: 25-35. Print.

providing drinking water to all the species living in the Great Plains and the High Plains, from South Dakota to Texas – but also a global resource, a key ingredient in the global food supply. Without it, we’d starve. Without it, all of us – the cattle, the people, and the flora – would starve. A sullied supply of freshwater – say, bursting oil bleeding into the underground aquifer – more than just tinkers with the global food supply. It threatens it. Whether it’s the Ogallala formation or the Bakken formation – two of the most decisive and coveted geological phenomena in this region – the Great Plains are under attack.<sup>14</sup>

What can humanists make of that curious word, *form*, that geologists use technically when describing the Ogallala formally as a “geological *formation*”? Why should this question matter for *literature* in particular? What is the relationship between science and art? *How can we make language happen?* If geology describes the Ogallala in formal and technical terms, then so does literature. After all, the term *poiesis*, from the Greek, means “form-making.” Geologists and poets could be described both, then, as technicians – of form.

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<sup>14</sup> Note the related argument currently circulating in the national media regarding yet another Great Plains geologic formation at risk – the Bakken Formation, a 25,000-square-mile massive bed of rock sitting two miles below western North Dakota and swaths of eastern Montana, southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan; the Bakken’s middle layer contains exorbitant amounts of crude (estimated in the billions) that has led to an aggressive, destructive, high-risk and high-powered chemical extraction process known as hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”). One recent report suggests that President Obama’s support for the Keystone XL pipeline “has little to do with delivering Canadian tar-sand oil to refineries in the Gulf and lots to do with the Bakken, which the pipeline would tap at Baker, Montana...relieving a bottleneck caused, in part, by a glut created by increased Bakken production.” The pipeline would offer a way for hitherto unavailable barrels of Bakken oil a means of transport to the market. See Richard Manning’s recent “Letter from Elkhorn Ranch: Bakken Business -- the Price of North Dakota’s Fracking Boom,” *Harper’s Magazine* Mar. 2013: 29-37. Print.

United in their different techniques, both of these technicians – geologist, poet – have the power to *transcribe* the physical form of the Ogallala. And so we can ask: what form can the Ogallala, a geological structure, take textually – through literary art? What is its poetic form? Can the Ogallala be replicated on the page, through the poetic field?<sup>15</sup> The Ogallala has ‘*form*’ – a geometry, a cut, physical instantiation, but the Ogallala also functions *as* a form – a particular, geological phenomena created through deep time. These questions matter for me, matter for anyone, who reads what they see sonically . . . visually . . . texturally: how do we describe the phenomena we live in the world with? How do we understand the matter sustaining us?

In September 2008, TransCanada officially filed an application for a Presidential Permit for the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. (Crossing international boundaries into the U.S. requires pre-approval from the State Department and final approval from the President, by permit).<sup>16</sup> The Obama administration *has* approved other trans-national pipelines. There are already

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<sup>15</sup> My use of the phrase “poetic field” derives from the notion of “open field poetics,” as espoused by San Francisco Renaissance poet Charles Olson; see his essay, the manifesto “Projective Verse” (1950). See also Robert Duncan, *The Opening of the Field* (NY: Grove Press, 1960).

<sup>16</sup> “Executive Order 1337, signed on April 30, 2004, delegates to the Department of State the authority to issue a Presidential Permit for facilities such as the Keystone XL pipeline that cross the U.S. border. In considering a permit, the Department of State determines whether allowing the border crossing is in the U.S.’ national interest, taking into account environmental and safety issues as well as energy security, foreign policy, and social and economic concerns” (3). See: Hobgood, Teresa. “Keystone XL Oil Pipeline Project Public Comment Meetings.” Pershing Center, Lincoln, NE. 27 September 2011. Ed. United States Department of State. Web. 23 June 2012.

several U.S.-Canada border-crossing tar-sand pipelines (some approved in 2009 by other Obama regulatory agencies and administration).

After the permit was, in fact, denied a Presidential approval in January 2012, TransCanada offered to re-route the pipeline. In late December 2011, Congress imposed on President Obama a 60-day deadline for approving the permit, but as part of an omnibus package that included extending a payroll-tax break and unemployment benefits for two months.<sup>17</sup> Demanding a decision on the pipeline was not originally included in the package; it was added as a last-minute decision, something thrown in hastily, a move widely seen as “forcing” a decision.<sup>18</sup> As a result, then Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was unable to grant the permit, citing the need for more time – particularly as it concerned finding an alternative route in Nebraska. President Obama followed her recommendation, citing that “the rushed and arbitrary deadline insisted on by Congressional Republicans prevented a full assessment of the pipeline’s impact, especially the health and safety of the American people, as well as our environment” (Obama 1).

Note that throughout Fall 2013 the State Department was itself under investigation by the U.S. Inspector General, for possible malfeasance; it is widely believed that the Department “violated its own conflict of interest screening

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<sup>17</sup> Banerjee, Neela and Christi Parsons. "Obama administration to deny Keystone XL oil pipeline." *Los Angeles Times*. 18 Jan. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Referred to in: Obama, Barack. "Statement by the President on the Keystone XL Pipeline." The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. 18 Jan. 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

guidelines” (*EcoWatch* 30 Oct. 2013, 1). in choosing a third-party environmental consulting firm, Environmental Resources Management (ERM), with deep ties to the very corporation, TransCanada, it was supposed to be objectively reviewing; in question was whether or not State Department officials knowingly ignored this fact. The report concluded that the Department “followed its existing process for choosing a contractor” (Grijala 27) – a conclusion that does not conclude anything about whether or not ERM did, in fact, lie on its disclosure forms to the Department. Even if officials followed an “existing process,” that in itself does not tell us if the process was rigged from the beginning. As U.S. Representative Raul M. Grijalva (D-AZ) recently stated: “The I.G. [Inspector General] only looked at whether the department followed its existing process for choosing a contractor. It should have looked at whether that process produces reliable outcomes” (Grijala 27). (Rep. Grijalva and Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) have since coordinated a Government Accountability Office investigation into the State Department’s environmental review process).<sup>19</sup>

The State Department completed its review of TransCanada’s revised permit application in early 2014, issuing the final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) on January 31 2014. The report was based on a March 2013 draft (itself based on the Department’s initial review of the pipeline in 2010 and 2011).<sup>20</sup> This final version, in theory, reflects changes to the project

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<sup>19</sup> Barron-Lopez, Laura. “Grijalva: GAO to probe State’s Keystone review.” *The Hill*. 25 Feb. 2014. Web. 25 Mar. 2014.



(including TransCanada's revised route in Nebraska), taking into account new information – including the record-breaking 1 million public comments submitted for the draft.<sup>21</sup> (The closing, 30-day public comment period for the final SEIS ended March 7 2014; and for that, more than 2 million public comments were submitted).<sup>22</sup> The final Supplement Environmental Impact Statement yields few, if any, changes to the Department's official interpretation of the project. Its conclusion remains unchanged: "the proposed Project is unlikely to significantly affect the rate of extraction in oil sands areas (based on expected oil prices, oil-sands supply costs, transport costs, and supply-demand scenarios)."<sup>23</sup> The report was widely panned as complicit with current US energy policy. By avoiding any critique of the project's role in exacerbating climate change, it clears the way for approval, unless someone higher up in government takes a stand on global warming. Given that global warming is just that – something global – it's peculiar that the federal office responsible for dealing with foreign affairs has nothing to say about this most international of matters. Certainly global warming affects international relations. As one critic writes, the final report assumes that "no single project would have much effect

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<sup>20</sup> Song, Lisa. "State Dept.'s Keystone XL Review Will Face EPA Scrutiny a Third Time." *InsideClimate News*. 30 Jan. 2013. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

<sup>21</sup> McKibben, Bill. "1 million!" Message to the author. 23 Apr. 2013. E-mail.

<sup>22</sup> Shope, Elizabeth. "Over 2 Million Comments Ask for Rejection of the Keystone XL Tar Sands Pipeline." *Switchboard*. 7 Mar. 2014. Natural Resources Defense Council. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

<sup>23</sup> As quoted in Eilperin, Juliet and Steven Mufson. "State Department releases Keystone XL final environmental impact statement." *Washington Post*. 31 Jan. 2014. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

on the growth of Canada's tar sands industry. [The State Dept.] based its conclusions partly on business-as-usual projections that oil demand and prices would rise amid continued worldwide inaction on global warming” (Cushman 1). The report takes no stance on climate change, negligently assuming that the oil will be extracted anyway – hence why the pipeline won’t “significantly affect the rate of extraction.” The Environmental Protection Agency disagrees, countering that the project would significantly contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>24</sup>

Both State Department Environmental Impact Statements (the original and its recently revised version) are thus believed to be biased, and rife with statistical errors. Nonetheless, the revised pipeline route skirts one part of the Sandhills but nevertheless ignores concerns about the Ogallala Aquifer, as one investigative report reveals:

...the soil [in the relocated area] is often sandy and permeable and the water table is high—the same characteristics that make the Sandhills so vulnerable to the impact of an oil spill. In some parts of the new corridor, the groundwater lies so close to the surface that the pipeline would run through the aquifer instead of over it (Song 1).

In other words, it still passes over the Ogallala Aquifer. And more, there’s a reason the soil profile in the re-routed corridor matches the typical profile of Sandhills soil. It *is* the Sandhills. As recent reports – from University of Nebraska hydrologists – have discovered, the Nebraska Department of Environmental

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<sup>24</sup> Giles, Cynthia. “Letter to Mr. Jose W. Fernandez and Dr. Kerri-Ann Jones.” 22 Apr. 2013. TS. *Environmental Protection Agency – National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)*. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.

Quality (DEQ), under the direction of Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman, *re-mapped* the physical geography of Sandhills eco-region; they actually changed the cartography, as though the Sandhills – formed over three to four million years – suddenly changed in its geomorphology *in one year*.<sup>25</sup> Obviously not; the map is a red herring. Instead of actually re-routing the pipeline away from the sensitive region, the Governor asked the DEQ to re-map the region, so that a re-route could technically, officially, appear outside the Sandhills. Governor Heineman is more interested in saddling his citizens with massive risk in order to help a foreign corporation profit (Gov. Heineman has received thousands of dollars in political contributions from TransCanada and Enbridge Oil and Koch Industries – all oil companies). The tearing up of the Sandhills includes knifing 30- to 36-inch-in-diameter metal pipelines into the stabilized sand dunes to transport the “dilbit,” or Alberta tar sands crude oil. Note also that this is a particular type of oil – not just typical crude oil. It contains bitumen (“bit-yoo-minh”), a black viscous mixture typically used in road surfacing, also known as tar (because bitumen is too thick to flow through pipelines, it is thinned with natural gas liquids and turned into dilbit, or diluted bitumen). This tar sands oil – emphasis on the viscosity of *tar* – is inherently more corrosive (because of its higher sulfuric acid content)<sup>26</sup> and has been called “the dirtiest and most dangerous type

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<sup>25</sup> Kleeb, Jane. “Keystone XL Still Crosses Sandhills, Still Crosses Aquifer.” *BoldNebraska* Dec. 3 2012. Web. 1 January 2013.

<sup>26</sup> See Beachly.

of oil to transport” (Jervey 1). Transporting raw tar sands oil through pipelines is “like moving hot, liquid sandpaper that grinds and burns its way through a pipe, thus increasing the chance that weakened pipelines will rupture.”<sup>27</sup>

In the lead up to the official U.S. State Department decision on the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, the U.S. State Department held nine public meetings in September and October 2011 in the six U.S. states through which the proposed pipeline project would pass. The transcripts of these public meetings are publicly accessible.

I want to propose that in the content of these public meetings exists the “form” of the Ogallala aquifer. Each public comment voices a varied perspective about the environmental future of the Ogallala; collectively these voices limn the outlines of a vast natural form, invisible to the human eye (the aquifer sits entirely below ground). But the voices flowing from this document collectively image its shape and sculpt – a portrait in words does emerge. Reading the public comments in this way, as a form of environmental writing, creates new questions. In what ways does this transcription transform these oral testimonies into forms of literature?<sup>28</sup> And what does it mean to read citizens' "public

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> While my interest concerns the transcript as a literary form, I would note that other scholars, especially in the social sciences, have conceptualized the transcript as a form as well. The political scientist James C. Scott, in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), theorizes ‘the transcript’ in a different light. Looking at “evidence from patriarchal domination, colonialism, racism,” (5) and spaces of incarceration, such as jails and prisoner-of-war camps, Scott investigates how marginalized, dominated, aggrieved groups of individuals create sophisticated forms of intra-group communication to express their private fears and opinions in the presence of power; these subordinate groups’ secret discourses – which often critique power – are spoken ‘behind the scenes’, what Scott terms “hidden transcripts.” The

comments" that have been privately transcribed into a publicly accessible form? I would argue that we can read the public comments as a form of poetic expression, paying attention to the ways the State Department transcription process formats the oral testimonies into an "official" and sanctioned public document - instituting line-breaks and other syntactical procedures (such as non-verbal expressions *expressed*). In this vein, I read these comments in the context of the documentary genre; I am interested in the potential relationship between the documentary form of these public comments and the poetic forms of documentary writing. I am ultimately interested in reading these comments as a form of documentary poetry - in the tradition of such modernist American poets as Charles Reznikoff, Muriel Rukeyser, George Oppen, Langston Hughes, Kenneth Fearing, and Kay Boyle - that explores ecological questions while experimenting with lyric structures.<sup>29</sup> Framed as environmental literature, the

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significance of a misplaced gesture or a misspoken word has terribly important consequences. Scott's research stems from the sociological theory of Erving Goffman, whose study of symbolic interaction in the form of dramaturgical analysis analyzes how individual behavior reproduces social systems; Goffman was particularly interested the ways public and private presentations of the self differ. See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (NY: Anchor Books, 1959).

<sup>29</sup> For examples of contemporary poets working in this tradition, see the work of Srikanth Reddy, *Voyager* (2011); Jake Adam York, *Persons Unknown* (2010), a stunning collection; Heimrad Backer, *Transcript* (2010); Mark Nowak, *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009) and *Shut Up Shut Down* (2008); C.D. Wright, *One Big Self* (2007), in collaboration with photographer Deborah Luster; Kristin Prevallet, *Shadow Evidence Intelligence* (2006); Kenneth Goldsmith, *The Weather* (2005); Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014); Lisa Robertson, *The Weather* (2001); C.S. Giscombe, *Giscombe Road* (1998), a research-based poetry that incorporates historical documents and maps, exposing how landscape itself is described through the vexed relationships among music, cartography, sexuality, and racial dichotomies; Fred Wah, *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (1985); and Simon J Ortiz, *from Sand Creek* (1981).

public comments reveal citizens as environmental stakeholders whose committed stances compete with one another – on such topics as Prairie systems ecology, aesthetic values, and the neoliberal economics of private-public capital markets. In doing so, they subsequently express citizens’ various understandings of *themselves* in relation to the landscape, ecology, and geopolitics of their time. For us, as readers, the public comments transport us into the trafficked intersection of science and art. We witness the emergence of individuals’ *ecological identity*.<sup>30</sup> Reading the full text of the public comments in this way – a 384 page document – produces an environmental text whose constellated perspectives on the natural (and toxic) worlds of the Sandhills offers us an intriguing example of the scale of environmental writing – as both a social-scientific and artistic mode of expression.

But let us not romanticize. This gets complicated. I take issue with my own claim that the comments represent “citizens’” views of Nebraska. They do, and they do not. Many attendees at the public comment session were not citizens of Nebraska; they were paid by their pro-Keystone XL employers to travel to the meeting to lobby on their behalf. Many of the people making public comments

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<sup>30</sup> I.e., one’s sense of self in relation to their natural and built environments, and the realization of *how* those environments shape personal identity (and how personal identity shapes those environments). I take my definition from environmental studies scholar Mitchell Thomashow’s compelling study, *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist* (Cambridge MA: MIT, 1996). Thomashow’s concern is with political and activist identities in relation to ecological advocacy (what he calls “reflective environmentalism”), but I would extend his concerns into the realm of all questions of personal identity, particularly sexuality, labor, race, and queerness.

do not represent the Nebraskan public. They are not like Britton Bailey, of Lincoln, who says, “I’m here on my own accord and have not been paid to testify today” (58), and then ventures on baldly to ask the U.S. Department of State presiding officer, Teresa Hobgood, “Is it ethical to conduct hearings in Nebraska to hear Nebraska’s testimony so that we can be heard, but allow TransCanada to bus in nonresident outsiders to speak for us?” (US Department of State 60). (I would note that I, myself, attended, and testified, at one such meeting, in Grand Island, Neb., on April 18 2013).

In these comments, then, we can see how ordinary (and not so ordinary) people wrestle with the following question: What *is* the “proper” way to manage the Nebraskan Sandhills, this ecosystem of wind-blown sand hills and semi-desert, under which exists – let us not forget – *the largest* freshwater aquifer in the world? And from what perspective? From that of the ground water irrigation district conservation guidelines (if they exist (and they often do not, depending on the county of the state you’re in)), or, say, from the point of view of those who recreate (the campers, hunters, etc.)? Or that of the water well construction worker? Further perspectives could expand outwards beyond professional identities, imbued as they are with the socio-economics of raced, classed, and gendered, laboring bodies. How does one’s sexuality influence one’s view on the pipeline project? How does one’s racial identity shape opinion on land use? How is environmental perception shaped by one’s identity (sexual, racial, political, technological, etc.)? Fanning out into perspectives from environmental

psychology and communication, such critical perspectives allow us to *read the public comment* – and how it reveals who they are, and who *we* are. One could argue that the public testimony in Lincoln creates an exposé: bubbling up beneath the comments are discrete messages that tell us more about human-environment interaction and perception.<sup>31</sup>

As critical readers of this material, attuned to form and content, to tone and acoustic, we are also positioned, then, to understand the dynamics of the human voice and, more keenly, what that voice reveals about human-environment interaction. The work of the environmentalist, as reader, critic, observer, shouldn't *only* be advocating for a particular ideological cause, but also understanding that position in relation to the larger relationship of our – human and more-than-human – co-existence. The environmentalist reader – like the geologist and poet – is a technician of form; in this case, the ability to observe *cultural form*, dynamics, the ever-present forming and de-forming of the present moment.

In order to read the public comment in this way, we should consider what it means to read archived, transcribed voices *as* testimony. There is a difficulty that must be practiced when reading testimony. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben

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<sup>31</sup> A premise that Freudian psychoanalysis might agree with. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud points out that when a person tries to hide their honest feelings, the actual feelings slip out anyway, in “involuntary tics and small, incriminating gestures” (quoted in Terry Castle, “My Heroin Christmas,” from *The Professor: A Sentimental Education* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010)). We can locate in the affect and gesture of the public commenter, perhaps, each citizen’s ‘honest feelings’ about this environmental controversy.



makes this clear in his singular study, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. In that work, Agamben explores the literary and philosophical problems at play in the production of testimony. He specifically points to the ways testimony from Holocaust survivors highlights the problem of testimony itself, what he calls “its essential lacuna” (13). Agamben suggests that testimony is an expository device that *excludes*; the writings of Holocaust survivor Primo Levi illuminate this point. Writes Levi:

I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses...We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did...have not returned...they are the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception...The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone (Levi, quoted in Agamben, 33).

For Levi, there is no witness. Or, rather, the “true witness” does not exist; Holocaust survivors testify to what they did not witness, what they did not experience personally but nevertheless saw up close. If anything, says Agamben, the survivors “bear witness to a missing testimony” (34); the “complete” or “true” witness impossibly exists through the words survivors fashion into a nonfiction account (as limited as that term may be – ‘nonfiction’ implying a fealty to reality; but in the case of testimony, where the witness testifies in the name of truth, what are we left with when one testifies on behalf of an event he did not experience personally? Testimony, arguably, is left to the witness’s *best-imagined* nonfiction). And so testimony transcribes; at all times, its narrative invariably

intertwines two diegetic levels – 1) the “submerged” silence of the “true witnesses” and 2) that silence’s impossible echo, through the words of survivors. It is important to recognize this problem of testimony, this paradox, because it offers us a way to read the public testimony about the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. Where can we locate the defining silence we often defy? What is the percussive silence vibrating beneath the noise of the hundreds of voices in this transcript? How to read, feel, think – write – with this beat? In this case, we have a curious situation. We have testimony about something that *has not yet happened*. So I ask: How can you bear witness to something that has not yet happened? Agamben’s analysis presumes that all testimony is historical – but here we see that this is not the case. In testifying about the prospect of the Keystone XL pipeline, one testifies for a future; here, the “complete witness” exists not in the past, as in the case of Agamben’s study, but in and through one’s prescient perception of the future, in the ability to represent the future thru prolepsis. In one sense, the public hearings I analyze here, then, are not testimony – as it is logically impossible to testify about something that *has not happened*. Yet that is exactly the point Agamben makes: it is equally impossible to testify about something that *has* happened. There is *no* testimony that provides a full picture. So, when reading testimony, you’re always reading around and through it. In this case, we can read these public comments subjunctively; we “attempt to listen to that which no one has borne witness” (Levi, quoted in Agamben, 38) simply because no one *can*; we read wishfully, witnessing the public will for a future.

One testifies in order to voice the destruction of the future: by listening to the silence ahead, we can voice its presence.<sup>32</sup>

Take, for example, the compelling testimony of Herm Knudsen, who testifies that he is “a small business owner from Ogallala, Nebraska. My house is built on the Ogallala Aquifer. Water for our home comes from a well drilled on our property” (51). Knudsen reveals he is “...testifying at this hearing in support of my fellow entrepreneurs” (51). Note the element of his identity he immediately reveals – the economic one, revealing so in four words: “I am an entrepreneur” (51). We learn why: “My mission is to create a new industry based on milkweed, a plant that grows wild in Nebraska. As I think about our business, I look out and I see billions of milkweed pods ready to be harvested. I look out and I see opportunities to sell milkweed in down bedding, body care and health products” (51). Describing how he’s used his “1942 John Deere combine” (51) to make a living for himself, Knudsen ensures the State Department of his successes in the free-market economy, noting how his “now clean, highly modified combine processes milkweed pods into three valuable raw material streams. From these raw materials, we make exceptional consumer products” (51-52). He concludes his testimony, revealing his belief in the supposed sure-fire solutions offered by a neoliberal economic model that

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the relation between silence and aesthetics, see Susan Sontag’s 1966 essay “The Aesthetics of Silence,” in which Sontag explores the meaning of silence as a social identity and as a distinct social register in which artists express their aesthetic and spiritual vision. See *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969).

creates unregulated markets wherever (and whenever) none exist:<sup>33</sup> “Denial of the Keystone XL application will squelch entrepreneurship. Denial will destroy, hurt and tarnish efforts to promote economic development” (52). It will promote *economic development* but what kind of *ecological* developments? Implied in Knudsen’s testimony is the contradiction that more oil passing thru his hometown will somehow provide him the energy – more oil – to run the machinery that could promote his local, home-grown milkweed products into something much larger, regional, and industrial. The contradiction of course being that he will not receive any of the oil – indeed, it *passes* thru his property, not *at* it. For TransCanada, Knudsen’s milkweed concatenations are a milquetoast concern. For Knudsen, the pipeline promotes an Elysian illusion that contrasts the more foreboding Dionysian probabilities – if denial will “destroy, hurt, and tarnish” economic development, it could equally “destroy, hurt, and tarnish” the ecosystem. In this Hazards of New Fortunes scenario, Knudsen forgets the intertwined relationship between ecology and economy: his milkweed will have a hard time growing in sand, grass, and water soiled in tar and oil.

Yet many people, like Mr. Knudsen, call the project good for “economic development.” What Mr. Knudsen’s comments likely reveal is the way in which the private costs of pumping oil are less than the social costs of withdrawing

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<sup>33</sup> For one perspective on the historical and philosophical underpinnings of neoliberal economics, particularly the influence in Chile of the (University of) Chicago School of Economics, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).

water. Since users – that’s us – only hold the property rights for pumping water (rather than the property rights for the water itself), individuals only pay for the pumping cost – your “water bill” is not necessarily for the ownership of the common pool of water from which it comes; it’s the price of pumping the water. No one ‘owns’ the water, yet people do: for example, billionaire Ted Turner owns vast tracts of land over the Ogallala Aquifer, not because he wants to live in Nebraska but because he wants to sell for private profit the public water beneath his property; it’s his right to pump from the aquifer. So how much should he pump? Enough to make sure the rest of us have enough? Only enough for himself? His crops? And who’s to regulate his right? The social costs of pumping the water are left to . . . whom? Concerned citizens? Local, regional, and federal regulations (if they exist, and if they’re enforced)? Knudsen’s public comments may reflect a particular line of reasoning that goes something like this: Because the water is not *my* property, neither is it my *concern*. But precisely *because* no one owns it, anyone will abuse it.<sup>34</sup> Knudsen’s short-sighted concerns about individual property rights and economic development would be more convincing had he been empowered to imagine his project in relation to the broader world of resources – ecological and social and political – necessarily

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<sup>34</sup> For sophisticated critical work on the ‘tragedy of the commons’ – a phenomenon first described in 1968 by American ecologist Garrett Hardin, whose fictive scenario of overgrazing exemplified the concept – see Nobel-prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom’s (1933-2012) groundbreaking *Governing the Commons: the Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (NY: Cambridge UP, 1990). Ostrom advocates for local, on-the-ground collective action to manage local resources, rather than top-down, state-regulated policies ordered from afar.

underpinning the realization of his creative aspirations in the first place.<sup>35</sup>

But what makes Herm Knudsen's comments *poetic*? Is this a mere matter of personal opinion (mine)? Any what's the critical importance of ascribing that voice this value (as something artistic, creative, imaginative)? Does it highlight, elevate, or devalue – manipulate? – meaning, matter, content? Given that the public commenters were not *a priori* providing their comments as poetry – but offering them, importantly, as voices of dissent and difference, opinion and opposition – does this necessarily prevent us from reading their voices as poetry? This has critical implications. If we choose to open up the definition – *what is poetry?* – to include non-traditional forms of “official” poetic structures, to move beyond metered and non-metered, or free-, verse, then one can also ask: what *isn't* poetry? Does this devalue the unique characteristics and capabilities of a unique art form, liquidating its meaning to the point of absurdity? Or the opposite: it's a testament to the ways in which that particular art form in fact *permeates* culture and communication? In arguing for the latter point, as I do here, we can extend and challenge definitions of poetic form – say, the art of the

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<sup>35</sup> And whose right is it for me to necessarily assume – and judge – that he hasn't? Or that he has? Or that he *should*? In other words, what ideology underpins my *own* opinion of and disposition towards his? Here I recall the work of Kenyan-born Christian religious philosopher John S. Mbiti's who, in *African Religions and Philosophy* (1990), declares “the state of possession and mediumship is one of contemporarizing the past...” (5, quoted in Parks, below). Thinking of myself as the “medium” handling these historical voices, questions of historiography become central to the task of reflecting on my own role as a “possessor” of the ideas, voices, and images – expressed in the public document I use as my source text here – and the way my own implicit ideological lens ‘produces’ their voices, coating them. In other words: What kind of historical past emerges in my own “possession” of this material? (Mbiti quoted in Suzan-Lori Parks' essay, “Possession,” in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995)).

line break – by showing how these forms turn up in unexpected examples; in other words, we can use traditional understandings of poetry in order to expand the definitions of poetry – a move that, arguably, reinforces and strengthens the ‘rules’ of poetry.

Rather than dispense with form and tradition, we can show its wider relevance. Poet and critic Mark Nowak smartly reminds us of this in his essay, “Notes Toward an Anti-Capitalist Poetics II.” Nowak cheekily quotes two prominent International Monetary Fund economists from a recent issue of the journal *Economic Issues* – their declaration that “ ‘deindustrialization is primarily a feature of successful economic development...’ ” (Nowak 337) – to contend that “economic theory is but another imaginative act, another way of forming the world via language, therefore constituting a poetic as much as a politics” (Nowak, quoted in Vance, 337). Nowak suggests we cannot separate the political from the poetic. Economic theory, with its political implications, nonetheless uses rhetorical and linguistic techniques to achieve those political (law-making, legislative) ends; it is a way of “forming the world” with language. Economic theory, like poetry, like public comments – each of these different forms of expression are *formulated out of language*. In the incidental but critical choices we make as users of language to create those forms, we engage in “imaginative acts”; we don’t just create; we create forms – we engage in form-making, or

*poiesis*.<sup>36</sup> As David Ray Vance puts it, “every opportunity we take to formulate language...is politically fraught” (337).

As such, the public document I analyze here is rich with examples of “forming the world via language” (Nowak 337), formulating opinions and input that will not only lead to “a politics” (337) – an international pipeline – but also “a poetic” (337), a series of imaginative linguistic acts enshrouding that policy. A poetics of policy / a policy of poetics: perhaps. But it is the way we read these “imaginative acts” as poetry that matters to me here; it is also *how* we interpret this information as a poetic engagement with ideas and imagination about *ecology*, environment, landscape, natural resources, and environmental health that extend this argument into the realm of eco-critical literary interpretation. I want to read this information as public testimony about the environment; or, put simply, as literature about the environment.

In their introduction to a recent work of ecocritical scholarship called *A Keener Perception: Eco-critical Studies in American Art History* (2009), scholars Alan C Braddock and Christoph Irmscher offer one definition of ecocritical interpretation: “The point is not simply to explore complexity or contradiction

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<sup>36</sup> While her argument is not about poetry *per se*, Elaine Scarry’s examination of the interaction between literary form and the expression of physical pain – that it “opens...wider frame[s] of invention” (22) – pays close attention to the way language and form produce imaginative, even counter-factual, revisions and critical interventions for expressing the “inexpressibility” of pain. In her use of medical case histories, documents on torture compiled by Amnesty International, and legal transcripts of personal injury trials as source texts, Scarry subsequently tests the forms – and limits – of what counts as “literary” criticism. See *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).



for its own sake; rather, ecocritical [inquiry]...attempts to sort through a given problem in order to articulate a more environmentally aware and responsive interpretation of the work..." (9). *Agreed*. One way to read more "responsive[ly]" for the "environmental aware[ness]" these public comments showcase, then, is to understand what creates this awareness, and how this perception "sort[s] through [the] given problem" of the Keystone XL pipeline proposal. What creates this eco-poetic information? How? Poet Denise Levertov (1923-1997) reminds us – perhaps tendentiously – that "any poet...only is a poet insofar as his or her poems manifest a peculiar relationship of the imagination to language itself" (267).<sup>37</sup>

While at first glance Levertov's claim for 'what counts as poetry' seems to echo Mark Nowak's criterion – that it's the "imaginative act...of forming the world via language...[that] constitut[es] a poetic..." (Nowak 337) – Levertov elaborates on the details of that relationship, clarifying *how* the "imaginative act" gets produced technically, if not formally. As she explains it in her essay, "On the Function of the Line,"<sup>38</sup> that "peculiar relationship" (267) between language and imagination is the product of a particular technical tool at our disposal: "...there is...no tool of the poetic craft more important, none that yields more subtle and precise effects, than the linebreak..." (61). This is key for Levertov –

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<sup>37</sup> See Levertov's essay, "Michele Murray" in *Light Up the Cave*. The essay appeared originally in *The National Observer*, 1974.

<sup>38</sup> Published in *Light Up the Cave*. The essay appeared originally in *The Chicago Review* 30.3, 1979.

for us – in understanding what poetry *can do*. For Levertov, tradition and form in poetry, if not a specific problem, betray specific concerns – namely, the use of poetry as a tool to hit hard on the accepted certainties of one’s time and the accepted models of questioning, questioning them; and the problem of expressing uncertainty thru the certitude that traditional forms of writing assert. Levertov exclaims that we must find a form that can dilate and constrict to the contractions of time, so as to speak *thru* the present: “the closed, contained quality of such forms – like the sonnet or heroic couplet – has less relation to the relativistic sense of life which unavoidably prevails in the late twentieth century than the...more exploratory, more open ended modes” (61). *Away with certitude!* one hears in these resonant, proud lines of the Black Mountain poet, the only female among them.<sup>39</sup> How does one write one’s present moment, register that “relativistic sense of life” of the time?<sup>40</sup> For Levertov it’s through that decisive technical tool of the trade: the linebreak. Levertov argues that it’s *the* tool that distinguishes poetry as an art form, precisely because of its ability *to* break with logic – specifically, in this case, syntactical logic. As a result of this break, the poem offers something unique – a chance encounter with one’s own perception.

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<sup>39</sup> The avant-garde modernist movement whose principal poets – Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Levertov – constituted the Black Mountain poets, ultimately refers to Black Mountain College (in Black Mountain, NC), an educational experiment that lasted from 1933 to 1956. The study of the fine arts was central to the college’s liberal arts curriculum. The notion of projective verse (referred to above) united the poets’ otherwise disparate styles; Levertov in particular espoused the view that projective verse allows for a poetics that emphasizes *process* rather than *product*. Other Black Mountain figures included John Cage, Harry Callahan, Merce Cunningham, R. Buckminster Fuller, Aaron Siskin, and Cy Twombly.

<sup>40</sup> Gertrude Stein also puzzles for an answer in “Composition as Explanation,” her 1925 essay.

The break in logic opens up an interstitial space into which a “peculiar relationship of the imagination to language” (267) erupts, a break that registers and

...incorporates and reveals the *process* of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking, rather than focusing more exclusively on its results; and in so doing it explores (or can explore) human experience in a way that is not wholly new but is (or can be) valuable in its subtle difference of approach: valuable both as human testimony *and* as aesthetic experience (62)

The poem as a form of “human testimony”: what does this mean for reading the State Department’s document as a literature of testimony? One could argue that *exploration* is what poetry allows for – exploring the space of one’s own perception. This type of art – the poetic arts – curates an exhibition of the mind at work as it’s processing the world processing it. And that is why reading the State Department document as a poetic testimony that *documents* perception matters. It’s an art form of exploration – of the mind, yes, but also of the language of natural resource exploration and speculation.

I would argue that the State Department formatting policy not only archives the public voice but activates new readerly possibilities; it funnels a set of testimonial voices through a series of conventions, including a strict formatting of the margins from beginning to end, with no exceptions. Every page has the same number of lines (twenty-two), the numbers “1” thru “22” coursing down the left column, creating a sort of legal notation, an indexical feature.

For example, the last full sentence on page five, spoken by the moderator (giving instructions), reads the following: “You can also provide your written remarks on the back of the sheet of paper that was handed to you when you entered the room; and you can also submit your written comments via mail, fax, e-mail or on line” (US Department of State 5-6). The sentence is nothing but ordinary, not particularly notable; it’s simply simple directions – clarity is the point. But even the plainest language – not to be confused with ‘clear’ language, or clarity<sup>41</sup> – turns into at least something un-ordinary when formatted for the document. The sentence bleeds onto the next page, and so the final two lines of page five appear thusly (formatted here only to replicate its exact appearance in the document):

. 21 handed to you when you entered the room;  
and you can

. 22 also submit your written comments via  
mail, fax,

Even the flattest prose – of a command, such as a direction, full of intention – transforms into something full of vector force, where direction in form and in content is a meaning-full *force* field of signification. Note the forward motion of

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<sup>41</sup> In an interview in *Jacket* magazine, the Canadian poet Rachel Zolf, remarking on her recent book *Human Resources* (Toronto: Coach House, 2008), says “I explore problems of communication and consumption in the book and want to enact them on the page and in the oral/aural space of the reading. To demonstrate that communication doesn’t just come, it takes work (as does reading), and that using ‘plain’ language is not necessarily the same as being clear.” See: Zolf, Rachel. Interview by Joel Bettridge. “Rachel Zolf in conversation with Joel Bettridge, 2008-2009.” *Jacket Magazine* 37 (2009). Web. 1 Feb. 2013.

the above excerpt: words like “entered,” “can,” “via,” “mail,” and “fax” all suggest technologies of movement *to* something else ahead, just as the poetic line itself dances towards something ahead (literally indicated by the directional marker of “. 21” increasing to “. 22.”)

Yes, indeed, *you can*: a phrase that registers of possibility. Formatted for my purposes here, each line lengthens to six-inches, running the conventional 1- $\frac{1}{4}$  inch margin standard for a Microsoft Word document (hence the incidental half-inch margin indentation in the immediate, single-spaced line below – a formatting quirk that does not appear in the State Department document). In their document, each line runs five-inches across the page; because of the numerical ordinates, numbered 1 thru 22, running down the left column of the page, the public comments themselves run a mere 4- $\frac{1}{2}$  inches across the page, written in Courier New, 16-point font. The effect affects. The formatting – inadvertently – deploys verbal expression in artful ways, as a restrained 4- $\frac{1}{2}$  inch line restrains the fully lengthened lines typical in standard prose writing, running left to right across six inches of text; the resulting line breaks enjamb the text at unsuspecting moments. We have a text whose convention *produces* a set of line breaks – in some sense, a text produced procedurally. In this view, the text could be read as a “set of visual instructions for auditory effects” (Levertov 64), producing a poetic field. Again, the relationship between form and content tautens. One can understand the content – about a pipeline marking a landscape – in relation to its form (poetic lines breaking – marking – the page). Reading

each line as a poetic line, rather than strictly as prose, offers up the possibility for reading the document in new, unexpected ways.

Notice where the line breaks and margins appear, for example, in Harry A. Jordan's testimony (here the font size adjusted to replicate the same line breaks that appear in the official document, rather than allow the procedural formatting of Microsoft Word to produce a different set of enjambments particular to this very document):

. 16           The sand dunes move. This is an area  
 . 17 that's 25,000 to 3 or 4 million years old. One of  
 . 18 the remnants of this is the Missouri River. You have  
 . 19 a depth from right on the surface all the way down to  
 . 20 1,000 foot deep in this particular aquifer. The  
 . 21 remnants of this is the Sand Hills.

Jordan explains the Sandhills as a complex, fragile system of wind-blown sand and hills that's evolved over thousands of years – and, like any healthy ecosystem, is continuing to evolve, through succession, energy feedback loops, and other biological life cycles. So while the Sandhills may be ancient, they're always changing. Fierce winds roll off the Rockies' Front Range in Colorado, sweep east across the Great Plains, and drum the Sandhills; the wind blows the sand into new formations, destabilizing the angle of repose. The eco-system evolves; *it's alive*.

The auditor of Jordan's comment experiences the progression of time starkly, thru an interplay of narratives. While experiencing the duration of Jordan's own comment – made as present as a live metronome, with the line numbers (16-21) inaugurating each new line, ticking off a new measure – one also experiences the narrative of the Missouri River's formation in geological time. The combination of these two time lines into the circumscribed narrative space of the public comment produces a counterpoint, where echoes of the past ("the remnants" of "25,000 to 3 or 4 million years" of movement in the Missouri River system) bounce off the present numbers coursing down the margin within the ambient space of the comment's column, reminding us of the way present and past play simultaneously in front of our eyes. At the same time, we're directed outside the text to the Nebraskan Sandhills, where the "sand dunes" are the present manifestation of past geological changes. Such time jams in the text produce weird and delightful reminders of the way the past seeps into the present, not unlike the way the topographical landscape visualizes and records environmental change over time.<sup>42</sup> Jordan's public comment – like all of the comments in the document – vocalizes multiple frequencies, harmonizing their contrast. For example, line number "20" – which indicates the present moment of your reading – appears immediately next to an entirely different type of quantification, the "1,000 foot deep" measurement of the aquifer's saturation: “.

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<sup>42</sup> For more on environmental time, or "deep time" (geology), see Stephen Jay Gould's *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (1988), as well as Pascal Richet's *A Natural History of Time* (2007).

20 1,000.” Likewise in line 17, where we see the interplay between form and content: “.17 that's 25,000 to 3 or 4 million.” Here line “17,” a formal element of the document, hashes against the content itself. This makes for delightful sonic play. In performing the song of the poem, one could choose to voice the line number as part of one’s reading. Think how often one’s present moment contains other moments in time – for example, how a thought you are having right now easily traverses past memories, or future worries. The formatting of the public comments makes manifest in one line various moments in time. It accounts for the marginal, in both senses – the marginalized practice of reading marginalia.

Reading the poem in this way, one can think of the American poet Susan Howe’s recent work, “Frolic Architecture.”<sup>43</sup> Utilizing the cut-up method, Howe densely layers photocopied text fragments (that she literally cut and pastes) from select 18<sup>th</sup>-century medical source texts alongside the autopsy report of her husband’s recent death – together, they co-compose, and produce a palimpsest of voices, enabling “her grief [to] speak...through textual interstices and shifts in diction and form.”<sup>44</sup> Howe reads multiple voices at once, often inter-cutting the voices from different time frames. The approach here is similar, layering in one text multiple voices and periods of time.

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<sup>43</sup> Howe, Susan. *That This*. New York: New Directions, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> “*That This*: information and images.” *electronic poetry center*. SUNY at Buffalo, n.d. Web. 25 Mar. 2014.



I think the information in Jordan's public comment refracts a new – reflective – perspective on the poetic nature of this document more generally. When Denise Levertov asserts that the linebreak is “the crucial precision tool for creating [the] exploratory mode” (62) that distinguishes poetry from prose, she means that the linebreak allows the poet to express what is grammatically inexpressible – “the slight (but meaningful) hesitations between word and word [and thought] that are characteristic of the mind's dance among perceptions but which are not noted by grammatical punctuation” (62). Linebreaks lineate perception. The poet “depart[s] from the syntactic norm” (62) and “make[s] manifest...the dynamics of perception” (62), as the linebreak transcribes – records – the dynamic play of pausing, thinking, hesitating, and feeling so integral in arriving at a completed thought. The linebreak often, then, introduces an “alogical counter-rhythm into to the logical rhythm of syntax” (62). The auditor/reader has the intimate – even voyeuristic – opportunity to witness the thinker thinking; the reader can share “more intimately the experience that is being articulated” (62).

What does framing Jordan's testimony as poetry gain for this project? For one, it allows us to look at his comment less as a set of logical patterns borne out of the laws of grammar than as a display of how environmental thinking gets thought. Framing his transcribed public testimony as poetry allows us to see that “peculiar relationship of the imagination to language” (267) Levertov so praises. So if we read Jordan's comment eco-poetically, his text becomes

something more than just a “public comment.” It’s not only the expository argument he makes about ecology that becomes interesting. That is, it’s not just the “results” (Levertov 62) of his thinking that matter – what he concludes here about the laws of geomorphology in the Sandhills – but the way his transcribed voice, as text, showcases his “process” (Levertov 62) of thinking and feeling through these ecological questions. In this sense, there’s a case for reading Harry Jordan’s comment as ecological art – verbal, literary art. Reading it as poetry we see how *what* he’s telling us looks as interesting as *how* he’s telling us. This is poetry’s gift; as the relationship between form and content tautens, it offers a flash peek into perception’s mechanisms. So, when Jordan says

. 16           The sand dunes move. This is an area  
 . 17 that's 25,000 to 3 or 4 million years old. One of  
 we see how his writing moves across scales of thinking – from a range of numerical values (“25,000,” “3 or 4 million,” “one of the remnants”) to scientific claims framed in rhetorical ways (“the sand dunes move”). You can also see jumps in patterns – swerving from the geological to the geographical within two lines. The linebreaks compress and help organize this range of thinking: in the second line, we have a concentration of numerical values, and in the first line, a repetition of sound (“dunes” “move”; “sand” “and”). In other words, we begin to see how these patterns reveal a type of thinking. We see how narratives not typically regarded as literary nonetheless utilize rhetorical technique in unsuspecting, even imaginative ways. In this case, it’s a personal narrative of

environmental and scientific reasoning that contains within it a lyric quality – here, a personal opinion realized thru a public medium. Literature or not, this public comment is still the product of an “imaginative act” – that of “forming the world via language,” as Nowak would say, and “therefore constituting a poetic as much as a politics” (all quotes in Vance, 337).

My brief excerpt of Harry Jordan’s two-minute testimony is just one among hundreds of voices in the much larger document at hand here. One could argue that the transcription of these voices into a government document, especially if we take Levertov’s argument seriously, does not shelve those voices away into the archive; nor does it *fix* them into place. In a counter-intuitive sense, the document permits – facilitates, even – the processes and explorations of the mind to continue, if not for the speakers, then the readers who come to the document. The linebreaks incorporated into the document inscribe the physical, mental, and emotional experiences of thinking and feeling; and as eco-poetic information, a geological formation shapes into poetic form on the page. Reading this as poetry, you begin to hear more than just testimony for the Ogallala. You begin to see something larger, a gestalt: testimony to the mind itself at work – the way a poetry registers the mind moving, feeling through thought, thinking out its feeling.

And so it is here we begin to understand how the official, U.S. Department of State-instituted formatting procedures incidentally *produce* a poetic effect in the process of producing an official, sanctioned, public document. If we take

seriously the fact that this document institutes linebreaks, then it should also open up new ways for reading the document. Reading the text with its linebreaks instrumentally – incidentally – changes the nature of the material: it calls attention to its *craft*. Following Levertov, now we (the reader) can read the public comment by feeling what they (the public) think. The linebreak does not change the public comment, but it does. I believe we should take these linebreaks seriously, for the profound implications it has on the ways we can read – into – legal documents (more generally), and the voices readers can discover from an otherwise hermetically sealed, official, archived, government document. In reading the document as an offering – of poetic material – new public opinions emerge on the page, voiced and activated differently. The document begins to emerge as a form of literary representation. This claim rests on an assumption, of course: again, it's not the literature *per se* that matters here, but the *reader*. To look at the document as a form of literature requires a creative, artful reading practice. In this sense, we can re-think the way we approach a text, or any series of verbal, visual, textual patterns that emerge on the page. The question is not 'What can literature do? (for the reader)', but rather what *readers* can do for literature – how readers can activate and create new forms of literature through inventive reading practices.

There's a compelling argument here: that within an official form – what's more official than a U.S. government document? – emerges the conditions for generative possibility, or, in other words, for creative, original forms to inhere

within the rigid, conventional *form* sustaining it. The methodological constraints built into the composition of this public document – the five-minute speaking limit, as well as the constraint of speaking itself (as opposed to writing, or, say, drawing the comment)<sup>45</sup> – highlight the ways in which this potentially reductionist, legal-bureaucratic form of expression in fact generates literary strategies *within it*. What new forms and voices emerge not only exceed the authorized *form* enabling them, but perhaps even parody them and ultimately highlight how these ‘authorized’ and ‘official’ forms – mechanical, mindless, mimetic – can be violated through their own repeated, incessant “excessive fulfillment.”<sup>46</sup> Each public comment – each poetic text – repeats its basic form for 384 pages: statements of *opinions* rather than questions (recall the constraint), and the attendant rhetorical register of a statement (rather than a question); free verse; comments of similar length (recall the three minute restraint/request); comments on one particular topic (the proposed route) and its constellating perspectives (on petro-politics). Each comment executes these procedures, fits a mold: it’s almost formulaic, the degree to which each comment fulfills these characteristics, repeats them flawlessly (hence to the point of parody, arguably).

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<sup>45</sup> “...in order to allow the maximum amount of participation, we ask you to limit your comments to no more than three to five minutes. And because of the number of people who have signed up to speak, we really encourage you to limit your remarks to three minutes” (5). Note the use of the word “maximum” in relation to the word “limit” here – a gesture toward the generative possibilities that emerge from restriction. (See Teresa Hobgood, “Keystone XL Oil Pipeline Project Public Comment Meetings”). Hobgood also states: “We will not be engaging in a question and answer session” (7). That counts as a formatting structure too.

<sup>46</sup> A phrase I take from the poet and critic Joyelle McSweeney, in her recent essay “Necropastoral, or, *Normal Love*” in *The Necropastoral* (Tucson: Spork Press 2011): 2-6. Quote on p 5.

Yet the poetic effect of the linebreak highlights the distinctive voice of each comment. In this sense, each public comment breaks with the mold while fulfilling it. Each public comment's utter distinctiveness *as a public comment* calls attention to itself *as* repeated, utterly *indistinct*, formulaic, exposing itself as mimetic, as though it's a taxonomic description. And yet: the utter distinctiveness of each public comment *as a public comment* exposes the tactical strategies available to the public within this circumscribed possibility. The result: original and important new renderings that create the very "imaginative acts" (Nowak 337) one would not necessarily suspect from a potentially unimaginative, rote, legal, sanctioned form.

The postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha would recognize this phenomenon; often, literary scholars – like Bhabha – contextualize the interaction between literary form and rhetorical strategy within the political and social worlds from which they emerge. While Bhabha's work on the cultural forms of post-Enlightenment English colonialism is a quite different context from the work I analyze here, conceptually his methodological approach offers a way to understand the phenomena I describe above. Bhabha argues that there is an 'official', sanctioned form of "colonial discourse" (318) imposed on the peoples and cultures under colonization.<sup>47</sup> By "colonial discourse" Bhabha specifically

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<sup>47</sup> See Bhabha's notion of "mimicry": "The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (321). For a recent, focused exploration of the relationship between postcolonial theory and eco-critical literary studies, see *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, eds. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B Handley (New York: Oxford UP, 2011).

means the “evangelical system of mission education” (319), the “political reform along Christian lines” (319), and the inculcation of the English language, among other examples. Bhabha argues that it is precisely because of the strict, regulated enforcement of these ideologies, or “colonial discourses,” that the colonized subject emerges *as* a subject rather than object; the “colonial discourse” enables the colonized subject to work within that very discourse in order to, as Bhabha puts it, “repeat rather than re-present” (320) it. Subsequently, the colonized subject emerges with a “discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them” (322), producing something thoroughly original, something “almost the same [as the colonial discourse] but not quite” (322); it’s repeated, but with a difference. We can see a similar phenomenon at play in the text of the public comments. Within the official “discourse” – the constraints – set by the State Department in a top-down set of procedures and guidelines, the subject on whom those rules are enforced nonetheless work within them. It’s *this* ability – for public commenters to re-create, re-fashion, and re-deploy ‘their’ public comment into their own unique public comment – that we see how each comment is “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 322).

I’m also intrigued here to note the overlap this interpretation has with the methodologies often associated with pataphysics, the modernist poetic movement which grew out of Alfred Jarry’s French Surrealist text *Exploits &*

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*Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1911), and proliferates still today among innovative poets. Pataphysics is “the science of imaginary solutions” (Jarry 22) and “the study of exceptions” (22). It uses the strict methodological constraints of science to generate an “experimental poetic composition” (Dickinson 616); it engages “the methodologies and consequences of scientific thinking” (620) in order to expose how those methods occlude information in order to *work*. Pataphysics parodies reductionist scientific analysis – and by extension, the objective realism of empirical reasoning – in order to explode it, create new perspective and perceptual shifts in meaning beyond the limits of realism. If it’s a pseudoscience, that’s precisely the point: so, too, then, is science, it suggests. In other words: what counts as the natural processes of the biological sciences? What data, sensory information, evidence, intelligence is left unexamined when defining what counts as “the natural processes” of the biosphere? Literary critic Adam Dickinson contests that “pataphysical texts are not simply mimetic renderings of scientific insight in literary form” (Dickinson 620); rather, such texts produce new, alternate epistemological possibilities *for* science. Pataphysics uses poetry to reveal science; and it uses science to reveal poetry.<sup>48</sup>

I mention pataphysics as yet another inventive method of rendering –

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<sup>48</sup> For contemporary examples of pataphysical texts, see Christian Bok, *Crystallography* (2003); Christopher Dewdney, *Alter Sublime* (1980); Robert Kocik, *Rhrurbarb* (2007), an exploration of the intersections between pathology and prosody; and Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture* (2003).



through reading and writing – scientific texts as poetic. While I wouldn't go so far as to argue the State Department document as a pataphysical text (or even reading it as a pataphysical text), I would suggest, though, that the document activates new readerly possibilities – ones that create new forms of knowing, generating alternate epistemologies. But again: *why poetry* when talking about the State Department? Why argue that it is this form of verbal art that matters for instances of environmental planning and political decision-making (let alone arguments about *why poetry?*, and what poetry can do for environmental writing)?

Reading this public testimony as a form of environmental writing while reading each individual's public comment as an individual poem, recalls one familiar way of reading testimony – as a form of social documentary. While this paper does not take on the entire field of documentary art – its histories, evolution, and conceptualizations – it is interested in one specific way literary artists and scholars have taken a keen interest the genre of documentary poetics.<sup>49</sup> Critic Michael Thurston describes documentary work as going “beyond journalistic reporting on the conditions people face, instead emphasizing historical specificity and attempts to draw out the causes of those conditions in an effort to encourage social change” (170). While the public

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<sup>49</sup> For a general introduction to documentary studies, see filmmaker and theorist Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* (2010 [1983]). For a recent examination of documentary practice among contemporary North American poets, see Cole Swensen's essay “News That Stays News” in *Noise That Stays Noise* (2011).

comments do offer “reporting on the conditions people face” – most often about farming and ranching conditions in the Sandhills – the document, taken as a whole, portrays hundreds of individuals, and in doing so offers a portrait of a specific region and its ecosystem, and the social and political pressure facing its people and future. Reading through all 160 comments, one sees the myriad reasons – ranging from religious, scientific, jingoistic, to name just a few – why people believe this pipeline should or should not trespass their land. Nearly ethnographic in scope, the 384-page document elucidates the “historical specificity” of the controversy – providing a picture of the unique ecological, social, political, and cultural forces at play in this debate. In short: each comment in some way “draw[s] out the causes of those conditions” through personal testimony.

The US State Department Lincoln Public Comments function as documentary in other ways, too. A key element of documentary is the way it constructs audience – one, as Paula Rabinowitz notes, “whose position is located within history...a subject of (potential) agency, an actor in history” (7-8). That is, an audience positioned to advocate, to “encourage social change” (Thurston 170). We could understand the speakers in this document as advocating for “social change” regarding environmental policy. These are not objective voices; they are ideological, with specific agendas – indeed, “actor[s] in history” (8), as Rabinowitz would say. More, the document deploys what Thurston identifies as “the generic conventions of the social documentary – informant narrative and

reportorial observation" (179). Such is typical of documentary, because the genre attempts to portray another person's experience, so we feel what they, too, feel. Hence first-person narrative and direct quotation: it's as though the subject speaks directly to us, although they do not (they speak through camerawork and the production process – which fashions their appearance and sound). The community of individual speakers in the 384-page document portrays informants whose differing perspectives refracting the controversy in myriad ways. The direct quotation – the speaker speaking directly to the State Department – has the effect of making the reader of the text feel spoken *to*, not unlike the way a documentary work strives to portray its subjects directly to its viewers. Notice for example the pattern among speakers to immediately establish one's right to speak *as* a speaker because of their credentials *as* citizens.

For example, Speaker 156:

. 19 My name is Margo Hamilton. I am a born,  
 . 20 raised, educated right here in Lincoln, Nebraska;  
 . 21 although now I live on a small farm near Ceresco,  
 . 22 Nebraska (US Department of State 374).

Or Speaker 94:

.22 My name is Larry Zink, I am 64 years old, I have  
 [page break]  
 . 1 lived in Nebraska most of my life; I was raised on a  
 . 2 family farm and for the last 25 years, lived in the  
 . 3 City of Lincoln. And in both those situations, I

. 4 have become very familiar with the importance of  
 . 5 groundwater to Nebraska, both in agriculture but also  
 . 6 in our urban environments (277-8).

Or Speaker 133:

. 20 MS. HOSPODKA: I will be brief. I'm Linda  
 . 21 Hospodka. My maiden name was Smith. I am from  
 . 22 Chadron, Nebraska originally.  
 [page break]  
 . 1 My family has, I won't say deep roots, but  
 . 2 extensive roots in Cherry County, in the Sand Hills.  
 . 3 I live in Omaha, I raised my family in Lincoln. I  
 . 4 travel through the Sand Hills on a regular basis...(343-  
 4).

The majority of speakers in the document follow this procedure, whereby they articulate their belonging *as* citizens in order to establish their authorial voice. It is a literary trope typical of the genre of American Autobiography, specifically the American Slave Narrative – where establishing your authorship entailed explaining yourself to the reader as “real,” providing biographical information such as your full name, place of birth, family, and age, establishing credibility with the reader.<sup>50</sup> Here in this document, it’s as though each speaker needs to establish to the State Department – and by extension to us, as readers – their authenticity as ordinary citizens whose on-the-ground experience living in the

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<sup>50</sup> Classics of this genre would include Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1791).

Sand Hills region sanctions their advocacy. Given that descriptions of “the lives of specific individuals who represent a group of common people...” (Stott 172) is a tenet of documentary work, it’s important to recognize how the speakers here stand in for such a demographic, and that their ability to show their ordinariness – to speak from that position – subsequently promulgates a central technique of documentary strategy.

And yet: for all the ways documentary strategy promotes veracity, it is still a *technique*. If the voices in a nonfiction documentary stand as authentic, factual, and appraised, they are produced as such through an entire set of pictorial and cinematic codes the genre has deployed since the founding of social documentary in the 1930s.<sup>51</sup> Documentary filmmaker and anthropologist Trinh T. Minh-Ha reminds us, in her groundbreaking essay “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” that “there is no such thing as *documentary*” (76). Citing the “extensive and relentless pursuit of naturalism across all the elements of cinematic technology” (80), Trinh points out the ways “documentary effect” gets produced through an entire set of “cinematic technolog[ies].” Such an effect promotes the idea that documentary provides some sort of unmediated access to reality, as though reality can ever be fully documented in real-time. Documentary shows us, says Trinh, that even reality “is more fabulous...more strangely manipulative

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<sup>51</sup> The ur-text of this movement, especially in literary documentary, is the Depression-era *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the 1941 study by the writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans – the work examines the conditions facing sharecropper families in the American south during the Dust Bowl and President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.

than fiction" (88). Such cinematic technologies that "manipulate" reality to appear *as* reality are the following: lip-synchronous sound (as though the camera and film naturally captured this, when really it's the product of production and editing); film that is shot in real-time (to appear more realistic); and minimal or no editing to the documentary (to better portray the actual, lived environment the camera mediates). Writes Trinh, "many of these technologies have become so 'natural' to the language of [documentary] that they 'go unnoticed'" (88).

In the context of the US State Department Lincoln Public Comments, we can see the presence of such strategies. In providing first-person narrative and direct quotation, as discussed above, the document has the appearance of being the 'natural' representation of the speaker, as though their direct speech has been 'shot in real-time' – so that their voices do not appear as doctored or edited. But of course, they are: their voices have been transcribed, and in that process the subjectivity of the maker imbues the final product we have before us. For example, in reading through all the comments, you will be hard-pressed to find vernacular – much of it is transcribed into Standard English or simply elided with the use of brackets. Which is more "natural"? Likewise, even the appearance of the "ordinary" citizens of Nebraska – those who live and work in the Sandhills – appear to us *as* ordinary is itself a set piece of the genre, a "persuasive technique" (Trinh 88) of documentary, a "technolog[y] of truth" (80). Writes Trinh: "The silent common people – those who 'have never expressed themselves' unless they are given the opportunity to voice their thoughts by the

one who comes to redeem them – are constantly summoned to signify the real world” (84). In other words, it is very typical to think of these public comments as documentary because documentary so often *targets* the ‘common people’ for their perspective. It has become a style and an expectation of the genre. Perhaps a more fully aware documentary-poetic project would foreground its own artifice, exposing the process by which the documentary creates itself as such. Rather than dissemble, conceal itself behind a set of techniques, it could expose the ways in which voices made to appear as “ordinary” and “direct” are technically produced. It could upend our own expectations as audience members, playing with our own desires as viewers of documentary. Rather than tacitly play into our desire to be “a subject of (potential) agency, an actor in history” (Rabinowitz 7-8) when consuming the material, it could play them up. It could engage these desires and torque them so we are left implicated in our own *need*, ultimately leaving us rubbernecking – at ourselves.

What I hope to suggest in this argument, in closing, is the way readers can begin to re-think where they can find “environmentally-themed” literature; it’s not in bookstores and libraries only, but in public meetings about, say, watersheds. It also suggests, then, the way that the professionalized study of literature – often circumscribed into a narrowly-defined niche market of ideas or sub-discipline subject to particular institutional and academic or disciplinary expectations – must also continue to think through where it finds its object of study, and keep searching for it in places other than the “nature writing” shelf at

the library. Perhaps it's in the public discussion happening around you, and it's up to you to act as a sort of ethnographer to transcribe this communicative art form and explain its verbal and visual strategies as literary strategies. Poetry exists, in other words, formally in informal – unexpected – places. Poetry forms abound, around us.



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