



# The Deep Time Trap

## Retracing Settler Colonialism in Lorine Niedecker's “Lake Superior”

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**Abstract** This article argues that Lorine Niedecker's 1968 poem “Lake Superior” reveals a limitation of recent scholarly investments in the concept of geological “deep time.” “Lake Superior” is a meditation on deep time; the Europeans who colonized the Great Lakes; and Lake Superior's assemblage of rocks, bodies, and bodies of water across timescales. In analyzing Niedecker's poem alongside her research notes, this article claims that, even as the speaker's invocation of deep time troubles settler-colonialist historical narratives, she nevertheless remains mired in what Mark Rifkin calls “settler time.” The poem's geological timescale fails to liberate the speaker from a settler-colonialist representation of and relation to the environment. While many scholars contend that deep time offers an alternative to anthropocentrism, this article argues that deep time is also a colonialist construct that can reinforce harmful Western epistemologies and obscure non-white ways of relating to the environment. Indigenous scholarship and activism offer alternative timescales that might allow us to care for the environment without minimizing the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman beings, without relying on settler-colonialist logics, and while centering Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty.

**Keywords** Lorine Niedecker, Lake Superior, settler colonialism, deep time, settler time

### Against Deep Time

While Lorine Niedecker was on a road trip around Lake Superior in July of 1966, her handbag broke. Her husband, Al, was an industrial painter in Milwaukee, and the couple were spending their weeklong vacation driving the circumference of Lake Superior collecting experiences for Lorine's newest poem. As she wrote in her journal, “My basket-pocketbook gave out from the weight of notebooks and stones so I bought another—made in Hungary.”<sup>1</sup> This ordinary incident sparked a moment of reflection on

1. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 15. This edition, published by Wave Books in 2013, contains the poems as well as a selection of notes, letters, and related writings.

geological assemblages across time and space: “The word for the entire trip is International,” she added, “from agate on. The journeying, the mixing and changing.”<sup>2</sup> The 103-line poem Niedecker wrote after returning home, titled “Lake Superior,” would reflect the contents of her broken handbag and the ideas it sparked. Indeed, the little-known poet composed “Lake Superior” through a long process of culling and condensing nearly three hundred pages of wide-ranging research notes collected before, during, and after the journey.

Niedecker had long been fascinated by the relativity of space-time. As early as 1945, she wrote to her lifelong friend and correspondent Louis Zukofsky, “Time is nuttin in the universe.”<sup>3</sup> By July 1966, Niedecker’s interest in temporality had collided with her passion for geology. She wrote to poet Cid Corman, reflecting on her trip around Lake Superior and her writing process thereafter, “I’m going into a kind of retreat so far as time (going to be geologic time from now on!) is concerned because a lot of it without being printed much is always on my side.”<sup>4</sup>

This article takes its inspiration from Niedecker’s retreat into time and reveals how “Lake Superior” situates the Great Lakes environment within two overlapping time-scales. First, Niedecker positions Lake Superior within deep time—a geological concept first invoked in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Scottish geologists James Hutton and Charles Lyell that accounts for the multimillion-year time-scale of the earth’s existence.<sup>5</sup> Second, the poem lingers within what Mark Rifkin calls “settler time”—a linear conceptualization of time “oriented around settler needs, claims, and norms”—while telling the story of the so-called discoveries of Lake Superior by white, European explorers.<sup>6</sup> Through my reading of Niedecker’s text, I claim that even as “Lake Superior” uses deep time to unsettle the significance of early European expeditions to the Great Lakes, it nevertheless remains trapped in settler-colonialist representations of and relations to the environment.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of my reading of “Lake Superior,” I urge environmental humanists to consider that deep time—in spite of its radical reframing of anthropocentric timescales—is already settler time. Deep time is a colonialist construct that risks both reinforcing

2. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 15.

3. Niedecker, quoted in Bazin, “Lorine Niedecker, Henri Bergson, and the Poetics of Temporal Flow,” 978.

4. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 53.

5. Kaur, “Home Is Where the Oracella Are,” 126.

6. Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 3.

7. Kathryn Yusoff describes Charles Lyell as overtly racist and describes how his racism and science informed one another. Yusoff writes,

While Lyell’s views [on race] replicate rather than elucidate any departure from norms in the discussion of slavery, what is important to note is how his argumentation draws on a linear notion of time . . . that is embedded in a biopolitical tale of applying stratigraphic thinking to ideas of cultural and biological progression. This notion of progression is used inversely to excuse and diminish the effect of the forced migration and enslavements of Africans to the Americas. (Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 79)

white-supremacist epistemologies and occluding non-white ways of relating to the environment. By contrast, Michif Anishinaabe writer, artist, scholar, and organizer Sâ-kihitowin Awâsis writes that “Anishinaabe peoples, like many Indigenous nations globally, embrace multiple temporalities while centering Indigenous ways of knowing.”<sup>8</sup> Inspired by the Mother Earth Water Walkers, I close this article by calling on environmental humanists (including and especially white settler scholars such as myself) to think with Indigenous timescales and temporalities. Thinking with Native times engenders care for the environment without minimizing the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman beings, without relying on settler-colonialist logics, and while centering Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty.

In so doing, this article responds to James L. Smith’s recent essay “Anxieties of Access: Remembering as a Lake.” In his experimental meditation on lakes, Smith “reflects on the totalizing nature of assuming a single form of memory, of archive, or of trauma in a world of lakes riven with partially occluded, subsumed, ever-present, and retrieved historical violence expressed through water.”<sup>9</sup> Smith offers the lake as a “counterarchive,” a place “where archival modes and anxieties can be exposed and explored.”<sup>10</sup> However, he also contends that “it is crucial to understand the stories told by scientific and settler colonial perspectives on lakes—extent, boundaries, entanglements, temporalities—and juxtapose them with other knowledge traditions and stories about the same lakes.”<sup>11</sup> In short, Smith asks that when we remember and recollect with a lake, we ask: “Memory for whom? Recollection for whom?”<sup>12</sup> I would like to suggest that Lorine Niedecker’s “Lake Superior” is a literary object that remembers, to use Smith’s phrase, both “as” and “with a lake”: the speaker reawakens both geological and settler-colonial memories through her circumnavigation of the lake, embedding herself within and expressing herself through the water-archive.<sup>13</sup> However, in spite of its invocation of geological time—a seemingly radical timescale—the long poem’s settler-colonialist orientation reveals to us the risk of “assuming a single form of memory.”<sup>14</sup> This apparent double bind is what I am calling the deep time trap: the allure of geological time—with its expansive account of human *and* more-than-human history—springs from a single—white, Western—form of memory. Reading “Lake Superior” begs us to ask, after Smith: Temporality for whom?

Many environmental humanists today position deep time in contrast to anthropocentric measurements of time.<sup>15</sup> Franklin Ginn, Michelle Bastian, David Farrier, and

8. Awâsis, “Anishinaabe Time,” 831.

9. Smith, “Anxieties of Access,” 247–48.

10. Smith, “Anxieties of Access,” 259.

11. Smith, “Anxieties of Access,” 243.

12. Smith, “Anxieties of Access,” 248.

13. Smith, “Anxieties of Access,” 245.

14. Smith, “Anxieties of Access,” 248.

15. Environmental historians have spearheaded the effort to engage with expanded timescales through a field-wide interest in what is often called “deep history,” which Ann McGrath, Laura Rademaker, and Ben

Jeremy Kidwell distance the geological timescale from that of the Anthropocene, writing that “the goal of deep time stories will be to place current concerns into a much larger flow of planetary history and futures, nudging deep Earth forces to disrupt our received narrative strategies and moral imaginaries and in doing so provincialize Anthropocene narratives.”<sup>16</sup> In his recent book Ian Baucom calls attention to the ongoing collisions between history and geology as early as the epigraphs to his second chapter, where he quotes Dipesh Chakrabarty (“Humans now wield a geological force”) and Timothy Morton (“This is not only a historical age, but also a geological one”).<sup>17</sup> In their recent edited volume, Carolyn Fornoff, Patricia Eunji Kim, and Bethany Wiggan articulate their “desire to foreground the deep time (liveliness, experience, agency) of nonhuman processes.”<sup>18</sup> They invoke the term “timescale” because it “rejects man as the measure of all things” and troubles linear models of time.<sup>19</sup> “Unlike a timeframe,” they write, “in which a period of time is neatly bracketed from what came before and what will follow, a timescale implies depth.”<sup>20</sup> Rajender Kaur takes a more critical approach to deep time, acknowledging that in “humbling human aspirations,” the concept of deep time has the capacity to obscure oppression and exploitation.<sup>21</sup> In spite of this risk, Kaur still emphasizes the importance of the “broader, overarching, biotic horizon” offered by geological time to addressing the realities of the climate crisis in today’s political world.<sup>22</sup> Inspired by these writings, I rely on the term *timescale* as I analyze the invocations of deep time and “settler time” in Lorine Niedecker’s work. At the same time, I suggest that invocations of deep time do not always “reject man as the measure of things.”

Poetry is one potential place for deep time thinking. David Farrier argues that poems are particularly well suited to the task of “model[ing] an Anthropocene perspective in which our sense of relationship and proximity (and from this, our ethics) is

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Silverstein describe as “a historical practice” drawing from “sources and methods often associated with other disciplines, particularly archaeology and biological science” while aiming “to tell fuller histories of humanity than traditional history can offer” (McGrath, Rademaker, and Silverstein, “Deep History and Deep Listening,” 308). For more on the uptake of deep time by historians, see, for example, Rudwick, *Earth’s Deep History*; Penna, *Human Footprint*.

16. Ginn et al., “Introduction,” 216.

17. Baucom, *History 4° Celsius*, 35.

18. Fornoff, Kim, and Wiggan, *Timescales*, xiii.

19. Fornoff, Kim, and Wiggan, *Timescales*, xiii.

20. Fornoff, Kim, and Wiggan, *Timescales*, xiii.

21. Kaur, “‘Home Is Where the Oracella Are,’” 126.

22. Furthermore, in *Timescales*, Ömür Harmanşah offers the framework of “archaeological time,” which he describes as “an alternative, nonlinear temporality” that accounts for “deep time leaking into the present through ongoing material entanglements and spatial proximities.” For Harmanşah, archaeological time accounts for humans’ ability to perceive and be affected by deep time in the present. This concept of archaeological time is similar to the temporalities articulated by Native American scholars which I discuss in the concluding section. Harmanşah, “Deep Time and Landscape History,” 46.

stretched and tested against the Anthropocene's warping effects."<sup>23</sup> He further suggests that Anthropocene poetics "can help us appreciate in new ways what it means to live enfolded in deep time." Indeed, this article proposes that Niedecker's "Lake Superior" be considered as engaging in a "poetics of the Anthropocene" as it enfolds the speaker and the settlers in the deep time of the Great Lakes.<sup>24</sup> But if to be enfolded in deep time is to be in relation and proximity to multiple temporal scales, then I argue that "Lake Superior" exemplifies how accounting for the geologic does not necessarily lead to accounting for colonialism. We can read the long poem as telling the deep time story of Lake Superior while nevertheless relying on the "received narrative strategies" of settler time. Ultimately, my analysis of "Lake Superior" reveals the deep time of the poem to be a settler construct that not only risks obscuring oppression and exploitation, as Kaur warns, but also reinforcing the same Western epistemologies that have led to today's climate crisis.

### Between Times

A white Objectivist poet living in Wisconsin, Niedecker found some success over the course of her writing life publishing short, powerful poems that sprang from her Midwestern landscape. Her intellectual obsessions were wide-ranging—from Chief Black Hawk to Albert Einstein to the Communist Party—but she was also enamored with the environment that surrounded her small teal cabin by the Rock River. She could name the wildflowers that grew throughout her family's properties, and she was known for identifying birds simply by hearing their songs. For Niedecker, these environmental realities of everyday life were in fact imbricated in the history she studied and the current events she followed closely.<sup>25</sup> She kept prosaic typed notes of the subjects she researched and often enclosed the carbon copies in her correspondences with Zukofsky. In almost the same breath, she would write of global politics and of her everyday life in her environment: "Lots of wild mint where I wanted to mow (with corn knife) but I wouldn't, such sweet little things."<sup>26</sup>

Scholars often define Niedecker's poetics as influenced by the waterscapes of Blackhawk Island, a small community near Fort Atkinson where she lived most of her life. Blackhawk Island was subject to a cycle of flooding and floodedness so consistent that the distinction between land and lake was sometimes irrelevant. In the opening lines of "Paeon to Place" (1968), Niedecker writes, "My life / in the leaves and on water / My mother and I / born / in swale and swamp and sworn / to water."<sup>27</sup> Surviving on Blackhawk was to be "sworn to," dependent upon, and dependable to ever-shifting waters.

23. Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, 5.

24. Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, 7.

25. See Sikelianos, "Life Pops from a Music Box," 40.

26. Niedecker, quoted in Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 149.

27. Niedecker, *Collected Works*, 261.

Thus, Mary Pinard points to Niedecker's "grammar of flooding" as a defining feature of her craft.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, both Jonathan Skinner and Victoria Bazin attend to what they describe as Niedecker's "poetics of flow."<sup>29</sup> The concept and "conditions of flow," Skinner writes, represent "a network of relations objectified—an ecosystem without the system, or one apprehended only in movement."<sup>30</sup> Bazin elaborates that Niedecker's "poetics of flow" might better be understood as a "poetics of temporal flow." By attending to Niedecker's interest in time, Bazin argues, scholars can understand Niedecker's language as an extension of her experience, which "fall[s] outside the perceptual and conceptual categories that provide coherence and structure."<sup>31</sup> In each description of Niedecker's poetics, we are given insight into a rich dimension of her writing life—a life that was subsumed and transformed by the rising rivers and shifting tides of her environment.

"Lake Superior" was first published in Niedecker's 1968 collection *North Central*. Described by Douglas Crase as "that spare ferropastoral of a poem," "Lake Superior" diverges from Niedecker's broader body of work on water.<sup>32</sup> Crase's neologism, "ferropastoral," gestures to the tender attention Niedecker pays to the rocks and minerals (especially iron) at Lake Superior. Indeed, the long poem represents little of the *water* of the world's most expansive freshwater lake and instead thinks with the geological formations that surround and support it. Niedecker described "Lake Superior" as her "magma opus"—a playful reference to the importance of the work as well as to its preoccupation with geology—and, as Crase notes, it is included among a handful of other poems in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*.<sup>33</sup> Yet in spite of its canonization, "Lake Superior" has received relatively little scholarly attention. This section contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Lorine Niedecker by critically analyzing "Lake Superior," calling our focus away from Niedecker's "poetics of flow" and toward the poem's complex representation of geological formations and settler-industrialization. First, I reveal how "Lake Superior" uses geological deep time to unsettle the significance of early European colonization of the Great Lakes region. Through Niedecker's deep-time poetics, "Lake Superior" indeed issues a challenge to historians' tendencies to foreground human stories over more-than-human life. Next, I argue that even while undermining Western historical narratives, "Lake Superior" also remains locked in what Mark Rifkin calls "settler time"—that is, mired in settler-colonialist and industrialist temporal orientations toward the environment. In this way, I demonstrate how "Lake Superior" exemplifies what I have been calling the deep time trap: The radical invocation of "deep time" in the poem is tainted by the colonialist framework that precedes it. In closing this section, I suggest that "Lake Superior" thereby serves as a caution to scholars who celebrate deep time

28. Pinard, "Lorine Niedecker," 163.

29. Skinner, "Particular Attention," 41. See also Bazin, "Lorine Niedecker, Henri Bergson, and the Poetics of Temporal Flow."

30. Skinner, "Particular Attention," 44.

31. Bazin, "Lorine Niedecker, Henri Bergson, and the Poetics of Temporal Flow," 983.

32. Crase, "Niedecker and the Evolutional Sublime," 28.

33. Crase, "Niedecker and the Evolutional Sublime," 29.

as an antidote to anthropocentric modes of relating to the environment. Decolonization is a necessary first step toward ethical human-nonhuman relations in North America, and, in “Lake Superior,” deep time is not decolonial.

Although the Great Lakes themselves “were formed a geologic eyeblink ago,” their history extends over three billion years, when they existed in the form of “shallow seas spread over the continental shelf.”<sup>34</sup> Even without using the term *deep time* directly, the poem insists on the “ongoing material entanglements,” to use Ömür Harmanşah’s phrase, between human and nonhuman beings—between rocks, bodies, and bodies of water across millennia.<sup>35</sup> One paragraph from Niedecker’s Lake Superior journal reads:

The journey of the rock is never ended. In every tiny part of any living thing are materials that once were rock that turned to soil. These minerals are drawn out of the soil by plant roots and the plant used them to build leaves, stems, flowers and fruits. Plants are eaten by animals. In our blood is iron from plants that draw it out of the soil. Your teeth and bones were once coral. . . . Every bit of you is a bit of the earth and has been on many strange and wonderful journeys over countless millions of years.<sup>36</sup>

The opening stanza of “Lake Superior” borrows language directly from her journal and, through a process akin to geological erosion and pressure, appears as: “In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock / In blood the minerals / of the rock.”<sup>37</sup> Through these spare and evocative lines, Niedecker claims that our bodies are composed of eons-old materials—minerals, water, and air that have traveled across the globe. In this way, she alludes to the geological fact that “no rock in the entire Great Lakes region [is] less than 280 million years old.”<sup>38</sup> The lines are Niedecker’s thesis on the geological assemblage of the human and nonhuman world—on the interconnectedness of what we understand to be of *the present* and what we understand to be of *the past*. As Jenny Penberthy writes, “Verb tenses shift uncorrected between past and present as [Niedecker] moves into retrospective mode, her own journey now one element in her project of engaging historical and prehistoric time.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, she opens “Lake Superior” by offering an alternative to anthropocentric timescales and collapses geological time in the span of a handful of lines.

In the next section, the poem situates ongoing industrialist and extractivist projects at Lake Superior within this geological timescale. The stanza reads: “Iron the common element of earth / in rocks and freighters” and goes on to describe the boats as “coal-black and iron-ore-red.”<sup>40</sup> The first line of this passage—“Iron the common element

34. Ashworth, *Late, Great Lakes*, 5, 15.

35. Harmanşah, “Deep Time and Landscape History,” 46.

36. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 7.

37. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 1.

38. Ashworth, *Late, Great Lakes*, 19.

39. Penberthy, “Writing Lake Superior,” 67.

40. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 4.

of earth”—appears to allude to the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans across timescales. Iron is, indeed, the “common element” not only of “rocks and freighters” but also of the human bloodstream. However, the enjambment of the second line calls the reader’s attention to the freighters that weigh heavily on the Great Lakes, linking geology (“rocks”) to the industry the field has spawned (“freighters”). Since 1847, iron ore has been mined in the Lake Superior basin from the Marquette Range, a deposit named for the fur-trading European. The iron ore industry and its freighters are responsible for massive freshwater pollution as well as for introducing a number of invasive species into the region through their ballast tanks. Parts of Lake Superior have been “carpeted with asbestos fibers from the processing and transshipping of iron ore.”<sup>41</sup> In this way, the first two sections of “Lake Superior” establish the geological timescale of the lake and situate the settler-industrialist presence within it.

As the long poem continues, it looks further back into human history by retracing the journeys of early settlers. By the mid-1600s—recent history, geologically speaking—Lake Superior was the setting of a continual drama of “discoveries” by some of the first European explorers of the North American interior. Pierre-Esprit Radisson; René-Robert Cavalier, sieur de La Salle; and Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette traveled into the Great Lakes region. The group of men is responsible for opening the region to the explosive fur-trading industry of the seventeenth century. By the early nineteenth century, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft lived in the area while working as an Indian Agent on behalf of the United States and also as a geographer, geologist, and ethnologist. Together, over the course of centuries, such expeditions would lead to the colonization of the continent through the violent displacement and genocide of Native Americans. Niedecker’s poem calls out these explorers by name: La Salle, Radisson, Joliet, Marquette, and Schoolcraft appear one after the other in her litany to the lake.

By positioning the European explorers within geological deep time, Niedecker recontextualizes the significance of their discoveries. First, “Lake Superior” names Pierre-Esprit Radisson, founder of the Hudson Bay Company and explorer of the Great Lakes. Radisson—like Niedecker—circumnavigated Lake Superior (albeit in 1659) and—also like Niedecker—recorded the journey in writing. The poem quotes from his travel journals and describes the canoes he traveled in as “Birch Bark / and white Seder / for the ribs.”<sup>42</sup> These three stair-step lines are a quotation from Niedecker’s research (written by Peter Pond, an eighteenth-century fur trapper) but are nevertheless packed with double meaning.<sup>43</sup> On the surface, the lines describe the birchbark canoes first used by Native communities and then by white settlers, known as *voyageurs*, to navigate Lake Superior. The canoes were indeed made from birch bark, with white *cedar* for the ribs. Radisson famously returned from an expedition of Lake Superior “at the head of a convoy of 350 fur-laded canoes,” jumpstarting the exploitation of the Great Lakes’ natural

41. Ashworth, *Late, Great Lakes*, 6.

42. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 2.

43. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 10.



resources by white colonizers.<sup>44</sup> The stanza also resonates as an understated elegy for Radisson. The canoe's "white . . . ribs" conjure the image of a skeleton, which might have been buried in an inexpensive cedar coffin near the shore of Lake Superior—buried today, perhaps, underneath the highway Niedecker traveled on. In recounting Radisson's grim story, Niedecker begins to call our attention to the brevity of the human lifespan in contrast to that of the landscape.

As the poem continues, the deaths and funerals of subsequent colonizers follow. First, Marquette's bones turn to coral.<sup>45</sup> Next, Joliet—a priest-turned-fur-trader credited with discovering the Mississippi River—disappears on an expedition of his own. Last, Niedecker introduces Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, perhaps the most famous of the explorers, known for his expedition along the South Shore which he recorded and published as a popular travel narrative. The poem lists the rocks and minerals that Schoolcraft passed while exploring. In these ways, Niedecker compares the human timescale to the geological timescale introduced in the first stanza.<sup>46</sup> The settlers move across a landscape, while geological features are formed by that same landscape—by the thrust of a volcanic eruption, the sedimentation of granite, and waves forcing their way through. Penberthy observes that Niedecker "challenges the ideology of the Christian explorers and their bigoted historians by locating the triumph of the region in matter conventionally regarded as inert."<sup>47</sup> While the settlers perish, the rocks and minerals of the Lake Superior environment remain.

Environmental humanists who celebrate the concept of deep time propose that, by positioning human life within a geological timescale, we (humans) gain a perspective that allows us to "reject man as the measure of all things" and to foreground the agency of the nonhuman over the agency of the human.<sup>48</sup> Literature, argues Wai Chee Dimock, is a fruitful setting for such perspectival experiments in temporality. "Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time," writes Dimock. "Against the official borders of the nation and against the fixed intervals of the clock, what flourishes here is irregular duration and extension, some extending for thousands of years or thousands of miles, each occasioned by a different tie and varying with that tie, and each loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation."<sup>49</sup> Dimock describes the *longue durée* as the deep time of literature and "attempt[s] to rethink the shape of literature against the history and habitat of the human species, against the 'deep time' of the planet Earth."<sup>50</sup> Dimock argues that literary scholars should consider "American" literature within a timescale that encompasses what came before "discovery." "Lake Superior," as a poem, asks

44. Ashworth, *Late, Great Lakes*, 36.

45. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 3.

46. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 5.

47. Penberthy, "Writing Lake Superior," 75.

48. Fornoff, Kim, and Wiggin, *Timescales*, xiii.

49. Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 4.

50. Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 6.

readers to engage in this very exercise by situating the era of early European colonization within the framework of deep time. In so doing, Niedecker unsettles the settler's authority over the Great Lakes environment by contextualizing their brief lives within a geological timescale.

However, I would like to argue that even while acknowledging the geological history of Lake Superior and thereby undermining the significance of discovery, "Lake Superior" falls into the deep time trap. Niedecker celebrates the assemblage of humans and nonhumans across time through her appeals to geology, and yet she nevertheless highlights the earliest European settlers as well as the exploitative industries that followed them while also erasing their violence toward the Indigenous communities that already lived in the region. Mark Rifkin contends that the United States' project of settler colonialism "produces its own temporal formations, with its own particular ways of apprehending time." Within Rifkin's formulation of "settler time," an event such as the "discovery" of Lake Superior dates to Europeans' first encounters with the lake—a timeline which erases the Indigenous people who lived in the region throughout the centuries prior. Rifkin also describes how the "the state's policies, mappings, and imperatives generate the frame of reference" for perceiving the settler sense of time.<sup>51</sup> Perception, as Rifkin defines it, depends upon "collective histories and anticipations" including "long-standing inhabitation," "exposure" to the landscape, "shared material circumstances," "memories and stories," and imagined histories and futures, as well as "legacies of past actions."<sup>52</sup> In composing "Lake Superior," Niedecker herself was subject to a state-centered frame of reference—through her "long-standing inhabitation" as a settler in the Great Lakes region and also through retracing and reinforcing the "legacies of past actions" of the settlers before her through her drive around Lake Superior. Although Niedecker sought alternatives to anthropocentric timescales, her representation of Lake Superior is limited by her material and cultural alignment with the white settler colonists who preceded her.

Indeed, Niedecker's speaker herself acknowledges the limitations of a deep time framework for perceiving the environment. Following the stories of Radisson, Marquette, and Joliet, Niedecker writes:

Greek named  
Exodus-antique  
kicked up in America's  
Northwest  
you have been in my mind  
between my toes  
Agate<sup>53</sup>

51. Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 2.

52. Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 28–29.

53. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 4.

By invoking the first person in this section for the first time, Niedecker introduces a speaker into the poem and also implicates her within the settler-colonialist narrative of discovery. The bones, funerals, and graves in the preceding sections loom over her—just as ancient (“Exodus-antique”) rocks and minerals surround her. Like her forbearers, the speaker circumnavigates the lake. Furthermore, the passage demonstrates the speaker’s confinement within Western epistemologies. She lists the geological and/or classical (“Greek named”) terms for rocks and minerals. She also acknowledges the limitations of her temporal frame of reference, which is biblical (“Old World”) and Christian (“Exodus-antique”). Finally, and importantly, she invokes the geography of Lake Superior in the terms of the occupying nation: “America’s Northwest.” In this way, these lines alert the reader that an awareness of the geological timescale does not disentangle Niedecker’s speaker from the settler-colonialist state and the settler-colonialist state of perceiving the environment. As the inhuman geographer Kathryn Yusoff writes, “In the founding narrative of the colonial state . . . Whiteness became established as a *right* to geography, to *take* place, to *traverse* the globe and to *extract* from cultural, corporeal, and material registers.”<sup>54</sup> In the final three lines above—“you have been in my mind / between my toes / Agate”—Niedecker self-reflexively admits to this colonialist “right” to taking space, moving through it, and extracting from it. Whether “you” are the European settlers or the Latin names of rocks and minerals, “you” occupy her mind from the inside out. “You have been *in* my mind,” she writes (emphasis mine), not merely *on* it, skimming the surface, but embedded within it, inescapable.

Furthermore, and most obviously, “Lake Superior” does not call Indigenous people by name. Instead, Native Americans appear as generalized obstacles and foils to the white colonizers: Mohawks torture Radisson, and Schoolcraft encounters the “Soo.”<sup>55</sup> Crase notes that the final lines of the poem reference Sand Lake—which he suggests is actually Sandy Lake—“where in late 1850 the Ojibwa bands of Wisconsin were directed to receive their annuities.”<sup>56</sup> The US government, however “delay[ed] distribution of their annuities until the increasingly bitter winter would force them to remain.”<sup>57</sup> As a result, approximately four hundred people died—but this tragedy is left out of the poem. If, according to Rifkin, “settler time” is defined as “notions, narratives, and experiences of temporality that de facto normalize non-Native presence, influence, and occupation”—then “Lake Superior” might be said to trade in settler time in spite of its acknowledgment of the *longue durée*.<sup>58</sup> The westernized names of Native tribes are inserted into the poem much like the names of particular rocks—something to identify but not to identify *with*—and the tragedy of Sandy Lake is glossed over. Indeed, by emphasizing a contrast

54. Yusoff, *Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 69.

55. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 2, 5.

56. Crase, “Niedecker and the Evolutional Sublime,” 45.

57. Crase, “Niedecker and the Evolutional Sublime,” 45.

58. Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 9.

between the generalized and overlooked Native presence and the individualized European experience, the speaker further aligns herself within the poem with the colonizers who preceded her. She identifies with the European colonists while disregarding Native identities, and so within her poetic “I” is an implied *white* “we.” As such, “Lake Superior” foreshadows the problem of many ecocritical modes of thinking—a problem that Astrida Neimanis frames this way:

While “we” might be more like other animals than our Enlightenment forefathers would like us to think; while “we” might be part of, rather than separate from, the mud at our feet and the rain whipping our faces; and while “we” might have become a “geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” in the Anthropocene (Braidotti 2013: 5), in the words of Adrienne Rich (1986: 217), “the problem was we did not know whom we meant when we said we.”<sup>59</sup>

If, on the one hand, “Lake Superior” celebrates the oneness of rocks, bodies, and water and also situates settler colonialism within a geological time frame, the poem also reveals how the speaker—and her settler ancestors—perpetuates a Western history and taxonomy of Lake Superior.

Melody Jue has challenged scholars to rethink the medium in which we produce knowledge. She asks, instead, that we perform “milieu-specific analysis” by acknowledging that “specific thought forms emerge in relation to different environments, and that these environments are significant for how we form questions about the world, and how we imagine communication within it.”<sup>60</sup> In the narrative of “Lake Superior,” the Great Lakes region is the milieu through which Niedecker’s image of the environment emerges. Within the lake’s milieu, Niedecker imagines a new mode of relation to the environment—a mode of relation that contends with both geological and historiographic time and concludes that we (humans) are the same “stuff” as rocks. As such, “Lake Superior” seems to presage Dipesh Chakrabarty’s calls for historians to “bring together intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital.”<sup>61</sup> However, Jue also writes that a milieu-specific analysis must “consider the observer’s milieu in addition to the role of culture, class, gender, race, ability and other identitarian categories and how the observer’s orientations within a particular milieu relate to the ways they speak about the world and orient to the world through language.”<sup>62</sup> I close this section by emphasizing that the milieu of a geological timescale—while it does toggle between “deep and recorded histories”—does not free the speaker from her settler-colonialist “ways [of speaking] about the world and

59. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 14; Braidotti, *Posthuman*; and Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*.

60. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 3.

61. Chakrabarty, “Climate of History,” 213.

62. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 11.

orient[ing] to the world through language.”<sup>63</sup> Neither Niedecker herself nor her speaker are settler-colonialist explorers per se, but they remain mired in a settler-colonialist orientation to the landscape in the language of “Lake Superior.”

In making this claim, I do not mean to condemn Lorine Niedecker or the speaker of “Lake Superior.” The poem calls readers’ attention to the deep time trap not by eschewing it altogether but by lingering in the deep ambiguity of the past’s present—what Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker call “thick time.” For Neimanis and Walker, thick time is “a transcorporeal stretching between present, future, and past that foregrounds a nonchronological durationality.”<sup>64</sup> In his own adaptation of the term in *Anthropocene Poetics*, Farrier defines “thick time” as “the lyric’s capacity to put multiple temporalities and scales within a single frame, to ‘thicken’ the present with an awareness of the other times and places.”<sup>65</sup> This thickening, for Farrier, is a crucial element of poetics of the Anthropocene. Indeed, Niedecker described her poetics as an effort in “condensery”<sup>66</sup>—which we might understand as an attempt to thicken the time and space through condensed lines, stanza, and syntax. Yet even as “Lake Superior” condenses language and thickens time, the geological timescale does not liberate the speaker from a settler-colonialist orientation.

My caution regarding deep time is akin to Jason Moore and others’ critiques of the Anthropocene as inattentive to the material and structural conditions that have led to climate change. I worry that deep time minimizes the violence of settler colonialism that should be central to most if not all scholarship on the Anthropocene. Thus, while I consider, after Farrier, the Anthropocene to be one “useful prism for viewing contemporary crises,” I also seek to complicate one of the key terms of Anthropocene studies—deep time—through my reading of Niedecker’s poem.<sup>67</sup> If scholars of the Anthropocene are to fully grapple with the disproportionate harm to the planet caused by white and Western people, then we might consider alternatives to the white, Western concept of deep time. Thus my reading of “Lake Superior” is intended not as a challenge to those who might celebrate Niedecker’s radical deep time poetics but rather as a broader challenge to environmental humanists’ turn toward geological deep time as a tool for understanding humans’ role in the climate crisis. Zoe Todd (Métis/otipemisiw) writes, “Because we still practice our disciplines in ways that erase Indigenous bodies within our lecture halls in Europe [and, I would add, North America], we consciously avoid engaging with contemporary Indigenous scholars and thinkers while we engage instead with eighty year old ethnographic texts or two hundred year old philosophical tomes.”<sup>68</sup> Todd

63. Chakrabarty, “Climate of History,” 213; Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 11.

64. Neimanis and Walker, “Weathering,” 561.

65. Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, 9.

66. Niedecker describes her poetics as an act of “condensery” in her poem “Poet’s Work.” Niedecker, *Collected Works*, 194.

67. Farrier, *Anthropocene Poetics*, 9.

68. Todd, “Indigenous Feminist’s Take,” 8.

urges scholars—especially those taking part in what has been called the “ontological turn”—to seek out and cite Indigenous knowledge over Western knowledge. Even while offering a radical alternative to human timescales, geological deep time is a two-hundred-year-old concept that stems from colonialist, white-supremacist ways of studying and representing the environment. By wading into the temporal milieu of geological time, scholars risk reinforcing the problem of a supposed-white “we.”<sup>69</sup>

### Being in Time

In her review of the Wave Books edition of “Lake Superior,” Heather Houser writes that to travel “across time scales” through environmental art “is necessary if we’re to treat climate change, mass extinction, and other crises as social, cultural, and experiential challenges and not just as problems for quantitative scientists and engineers.”<sup>70</sup> Many scholars and artists have embraced the geological timescale as a mode of reorienting their temporal perspective—a way of fathoming the unfathomable impact humans have had on the environment in recent history. Others have developed new temporal concepts and methods for experiencing the environment otherwise. For example, Ann McGrath, Laura Rademaker, and Ben Silverstein contend that practitioners of deep history should cultivate a practice of “deep listening” in order to “account [for] the fact that Indigenous people have long held their own traditions of creating and possessing historical knowledge that covers the expanse of deep time.”<sup>71</sup> As I close this article, I’d like to both listen to and think with the work of Native American scholars—and Anishinaabe scholars in particular—who have offered formulations of time that work against settler time through Indigenous temporal sovereignty. Such temporalities and timescales engender care for the Great Lakes environment without relying on settler-colonialist epistemologies; without minimizing the “liveliness, experience, agency” of the nonhuman (to use Fornoff, Kim, and Wiggin’s language); and without erasing the presence and knowledge of Native people.

Renée E. Mzinegiizhigo-kwe Bédard, a scholar of Anishinaabeg ancestry and a member of the Dokis First Nation, describes the difference between colonial and Indigenous relations to the nonhuman—and to water, in particular:

Whereas colonial society views the environment as separate, the Earth consisting of raw material resources to use, exploit, and deplete, Nishnaabeg people view the land, water,

69. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 14.

70. Houser, “Geologic Time from Now On!”

71. McGrath, Rademaker, and Silverstein, “Deep History and Deep Listening,” 308. The authors reveal that there are Indigenous epistemologies that invoke deep timescales, and they cite examples from Australia. For the purposes of this article on Lake Superior, which is in Anishinaabe territory, I will focus on engaging with the work of Native American scholars and thinkers—particularly Anishinaabe scholars and thinkers. Rather than invoking “deep time,” these scholars focus on temporalities and timescales that are grounded in kinship, land-based, and embodied.

plants, animals, and sky world as one unified and interdependent living system that works to sustain us all. As the land, water, sky, plants, and animals are connected, so is every aspect of life. The sacredness of water is not separate from human beings.<sup>72</sup>

Bédard describes humans'—and especially women's—responsibility for caring for and protecting water and celebrates, by way of example, the work of the Mother Earth Water Walkers. The Water Walkers, a group of Indigenous women led by Anishinaabe water protector Josephine Mandamin, organized in 2000 to walk the circumferences of each of the Great Lakes in order to raise awareness of the devastating environmental impact of the region's industries and development. In 2003, they began by walking around Lake Superior: "The action of walking is a movement toward change for the present and the future," Bédard writes, "For many of the women participating in the Water Walk, the walk represents a chance to make a difference."<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the Water Walks have succeeded in raising awareness and in foregrounding Indigenous communities and concerns with regards to water policy and protection in the region.<sup>74</sup> Their practice also offers an alternative model to the timescale of geological time by emphasizing closeness rather than distance and presence rather than dissonance. Ginn, Bastian, Farrier, and Kidwell write that "anticipating ruin and confronting vast time scales can . . . prompt a renewed sense of hope for transformation or at least for recuperation and collaborative survival in a damaged but not yet dead world."<sup>75</sup> We might understand the Water Walkers' practice of dwelling in the experience of moving through a landscape at the timescale of the body as not only the hope for "collaborative survival" but also the enactment of it.

Lorine Niedecker's own circumnavigation of Lake Superior—by car—over forty years prior in fact created distance between her body and the body of water she was writing about. Even while her poem acknowledges, as Bédard does, the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life, her embodied experience of driving around the lake prevented her from making sustained contact with the water. She writes in her notebook,

What I didn't foresee was that the highway doesn't always run next to the lake (Superior or Michigan) and that you can travel almost entirely around Superior . . . without finding more than a couple of accessible beaches. Where you can with some difficulty walk over that terrain to the shore you suddenly find you're on a high bluff and how are you going

72. Bédard, "Keepers of the Water," 95.

73. Bédard, "Keepers of the Water," 101.

74. Indigenous communities have continued to fight to protect Midwestern water bodies in the decade since the 2000 Water Walk. In 2021, activists traveled from across the United States to defend Minnesota's waterways against the replacement of Line 3—a pipeline owned by Enbridge Inc. intended to carry crude oil from Alberta, Canada, to Superior, Wisconsin, in spite of the risk it poses to pollute, contaminate, and poison the watersheds it passes through. At the time of writing, over six hundred Native activists and their allies have been arrested in the fight to stop Line 3. The Biden administrator has failed to block it.

75. Ginn et al., "Introduction," 216.

to get way down to the water. Or you're whizzing along the highway with a glimpse of beach but there's traffic behind and you simply continue to whiz.<sup>76</sup>

The poem mimics these high bluffs. Short lines form jagged columns down the page, occasionally breaking into descending stairsteps, sometimes broken by abrupt section breaks. The speaker of "Lake Superior" is always approaching the lake but never quite arriving, always stopping to "say how-do-you-do to an agate," as Niedecker writes in her notebook, but never submerging herself in the big and cold water. The timescale with which she approaches the lake isn't quite right. She's driving around the body of water at highway speeds, hoping to finish the loop in the time allowed by her husband's weeklong vacation. Niedecker's experience of the *space* of Lake Superior is determined by the Western conceptualization of time since the mid-nineteenth century: "predominantly linear, an empty container for events."<sup>77</sup> Perhaps this is why, from her vantage in the passenger seat, Niedecker embraces geological time in her poetics and "zooms out from local environments to take in the whole planet."<sup>78</sup>

This "zooming out" in space and time to account for geological timescales makes the linear arrow of time much longer—and even less stable—but is nonetheless still rooted in Western temporalities. Kyle Powys Whyte, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, describes "kinship time" as a temporality that contraindicates linear time and centers "an ethic of shared responsibility" when imagining crises such as climate change.<sup>79</sup> Kinship time decenters the human—much like geological time—and yet it stems from Native rather than colonialist knowledge and does not risk minimizing humans' responsibility for mutual caretaking relations with the nonhuman world. Thus, I'd like to suggest that kinship time, too, operates at the timescale of the body by centering human's active and ongoing "responsibility for one another's safety, well-being, and self-determination."<sup>80</sup> Awâsis's own account of Anishinaabe time encompasses the kinship time that Whyte describes: "Anishinaabe *gkendaasowin* (knowledge) is land-based and embodied in individuals, families, communities, and nations that enact a multiplicity of temporal modes. . . . Indigenous temporalities can be understood as enmeshed with the land, a set of 'relationships of things to each other' (Deloria 2001: 23)."<sup>81</sup>

Settlers of Lake Superior—in the past and present—relied and still rely on a linear understanding of time that discriminates against Indigenous knowledge and land-based, embodied relationships. For example, the settler Henry Rowe Schoolcraft made his name, in part, by claiming to discover the true source of the Mississippi River, a small lake he named Itasca over 150 miles from Lake Superior. Niedecker was especially

76. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 9.

77. Rademaker, "Sixty Thousand Years Is not Forever," 246.

78. Houser, "Geologic Time from Now On!"

79. Whyte, "Time as Kinship," 39.

80. Whyte, "Time as Kinship," 39.

81. Awâsis, "Anishinaabe Time," 831; Whyte, "Time as Kinship," 39; Deloria, "Power and Place Equal Personality."



fascinated by Schoolcraft and writes extensively of him in her notes, describing him as an “Indian Agent of the Territory, a geologist and something of a poet, a politician and an explorer.”<sup>82</sup> She records her wish to follow his footsteps: “Ah, a long shot, but could we swerve off our course a bit and from the Soo to Lake Itasca go west from Grand Marais or Duluth instead of directly home?”<sup>83</sup> The penultimate two stanzas recount the proposed detour, whereupon the speaker reinserts herself into the narrative of the lake:

The smooth black stone  
I picked up in the true source park  
the leaf beside it  
Once was stone  
Why should we hurry  
Home<sup>84</sup>

Niedecker packs this section with the same ambivalence that characterizes the poem as a whole. In circumnavigating Lake Superior—which Schoolcraft called “the blue profound”—she retraced the journeys of the settler colonists who preceded her. Yet, at the same time, “Lake Superior” poses a question that reads more like a statement. Without its question mark, “Why should we hurry / Home” becomes rhetorical. *We should not*, Niedecker seems to say, *hurry home*. Indeed, through her characteristic use of slant rhyme, Niedecker aligns the “stone” found throughout the Lake Superior region with the concept of “home”: Home comes from and returns to stone. In this way, she calls into question not only the settler-colonist’s value of private property—and a permanent home—but also the modern tendency to hurry toward it. Niedecker wrote in a letter to Corman about her trip, “I see a flower I’ve never seen or rocks . . . or a glimpse of a blue lake, but you whiz by—you’d have to walk—someday—after you’re dead.”<sup>85</sup>

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes that “Indigenous thought doesn’t dissect time into past, present, and future. The future is here in the form of the practices of the present, in which the past is also here influencing. . . . This works because constellations are place-based relationships, and land based relationships are the foundation of Indigenous thought.”<sup>86</sup> In her essay “Water Walk Pedagogy,” Water Walker Violet Caibaiosai writes of her experience walking around the Great Lakes, cultivating her land-based relationships:

*Chi-miigwetch Gchi-manido, gizhe-manido* for the life I have witnessed, to realize all that I had taken for granted before this walk. Now I have seen the smallest of beings who

82. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 14.

83. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 14.

84. Niedecker, *Lake Superior*, 6.

85. Niedecker quoted in Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 69.

86. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 213.

crawl upon the Earth, those who make their way to the tip of a blade of grass making their prayer offering to give thanks for life on each new day. . . . I am further reminded that I, too, am comprised of water for as I stand and listen to Anishinabe-kwe singing their morning songs to us as we begin our day's journey, I am thrilled at the sight of their breath.<sup>87</sup>

By encountering the Great Lakes landscape through the timescale of the body, Caibaiosai develops an awareness of the interconnectedness of humans and more-than-humans alongside and through water. Environmental humanists might understand the timescale of the body as a method rather than as a concept—a tool for caring for the environment while thinking with Indigenous temporalities. The timescale requires one to inhabit their human body while celebrating that the environment is “not separate from human beings.”<sup>88</sup> Rather than positioning humans within the grand scale of geological time, it demands radical attention and accountability to the present as well as to one's ongoing presence.

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87. Caibaiosai, “Water Walk Pedagogy, 108–9.

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