Analog Fracture, Digital Illusion:

Andrew Zawacki's *Videotape* and the Poetics of the Human-Technology Relationship

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Abstract

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Poetry thrives on wistfulness, absence, tragedy; it loves quirks, irreconcilable tensions, fatal flaws. We, as readers, might harbor tender feelings toward the analog line-glitches of VHS tape or the auditory snow from an out-of-range radio station. But it's undeniable that many of these same technologies have caused, and continue to cause, extensive suffering. Obsolete technologies therefore offer fertile ground to engage with all the above poetic attributes, an affordance on which Andrew Zawacki founds the poetics of his collection *Videotape*. Our fondness for outmoded technologies (as well as our attraction to cutting-edge novelties) creates an irreconcilable tension with the horrors they have caused. In Zawacki's poetics of the human-technological relationship, this conflict is the driving force.

Introduction

In his poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Walt Whitman rhapsodizes about the crowded ferry that carried workers home to Brooklyn from Manhattan during his youth in the 1820s. In the scene, Whitman envisions a dazzling future of technological advance. He writes of "the simple, compact, well-join'd scheme" of the ferry and its passengers, "myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme" (2:2). Whitman's conception of "the scheme" most directly refers to the straightforward, compartmentalized relationships between the ferry riders and operators, the vessel and the rushing water that surrounds it. But "the scheme" refers also to the emerging relationships between people and technology that came to define modernity. "Scheme" borrows from the language of engineering; the word calls to mind blueprints and mathematical formulas. And the scheme's "well-join'd" nature references handicraft and industry, tying itself to images of carpentry or metalwork in characterizing its human subjects. The people on the ferry, Whitman's speaker included, are anonymous—gloriously so, as the speaker describes them, bursting with "the certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others," observable yet separate, a source of curious inspiration (2:7).

Yet it is insufficient to take this optimistic claim at face value. As Edward Hirsch suggests, to assert the simplistic stance that Whitman's speaker is "some sort of preadolescent, prototypical American Adam" unaware of the perils of the modern world is to misunderstand a key aspect of Whitman's work (41). Whitman's speaker does not praise the web of connection and isolation on the Brooklyn ferry solely out of excitement. As Kenneth Burke argues, if Whitman seems overly optimistic, his optimism is likely a way of "whistling in the dark," comforting himself and his readers by emphasizing the elation of modernity rather than the despair (192). When Whitman sings of the disintegration of self and the "fine centrifugal spokes

of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water," mechanical and godlike, he does so not out of ignorance of the consequences of industry but despite a bleak awareness of them. In this sense, one of the principal tasks of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is to locate humanity within a scene of emerging mechanical isolation.

Whitman's guarded celebration of this and similar scenes uses the language of technological innovation as a lens through which to study the American condition. In doing so, his verse foregrounds the work of later poets.

One poet whose work points back to Whitman is Andrew Zawacki, whose 2013 collection *Videotape* investigates language-as-technology and the relationship between the human speaker and the technology that informs their gaze, studying the ways that poetry can function as a digital recording device, full of glitches and erasures, in constant conflict with obsolescence, its own gradual death. In its fascination with the triumphs and dysfunctions of technologies both outmoded and cutting-edge, the collection offers a vision of humanity as a kind of massive machine, stumbling through history toward an intangible, and possibly horrific, future. Like Whitman, Zawacki locates the human within the technological.

One difference between Zawacki and Whitman that should be foregrounded, however, has to do with each poet's attitude toward the intangibility of that future. Zawacki's mode of address is much less confident than that of Whitman, who asks of his unknown future reader "What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?" before answering his own question: "Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not" (5:4). Whitman sings (if there's another verb to describe his style, I haven't found it) to the futurity embodied in his reader with a sureness that is impossible in Zawacki's era. With the brute technological violence of the Civil War still five years away at the time "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" was first

published, Whitman might have sensed the underlying darkness of the scene his poem describes, but he could not have known its full scope. He saw anonymity and isolation and interconnection on an unfathomable scale, but not what the conditions of modern subjectivity (and political and economic structures) would, in part, lead toward.

I'm reminded of a passage from *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, where John Berger summarizes the historical factors that gave rise to Cubism and allowed it, during the brief period between 1907 and 1914, to become arguably the most important artistic practice of the twentieth century:

> The Cubists were at a point of startling coincidence. They inherited from nineteenth-century art the revolutionary promise of dialectical materialism. They sensed at the turn of this century the promise of the new means of production with all its world implications. They expressed their consequent enthusiasm for the future in terms which are justified by modern science. And they did this in the one decade in recent history when it was possible to possess such enthusiasm and yet ignore, without deliberate evasion, the political complexities and terrors involved. They painted the good omens of the modern world. (71)

Similarly to how the Cubists were painting with guarded optimism toward the modern development of Europe in the years immediately preceding the first World War, Whitman was writing during a period of American technological expansion just before that technology was deployed to its most grisly extent. Whitman's optimism, however guarded, was significantly bolstered by the historical period that produced it. For a poet of the twenty-first century, such as Zawacki—aware of the mounting technological horrors of the Civil War, both World Wars, and countless later incidences of mass violence aided by modern technology—such an address is impossible.

Zawacki therefore addresses technology soberly, constantly conscious of both its familiarity and its destructive power. In one poem Zawacki describes a "weather report" of

"oxide clogging / the video head, atmospheres lit / by T-bulb," where the speaker's environment is compared to the smudged image caused by the ferric oxide coating of a videotape rubbing off on the head that reads it (29). The atmosphere is blurred, smoggy, and lit artificially, as if being played back on a dirty and dysfunctional machine. Here Zawacki is in conversation more with the destruction of global warming, with its power to smudge and erase ecosystems, than with warfare specifically, but both are instances of technologically wrought devastation, and often intertwined. The technological language of the poem is so familiar as to define the speaker's perspective on the landscape, and the landscape it describes is one of habituated erosion brought about by some of the same technologies that inform that perspective.

Zawacki's decision to engage with obsolete, often analog technologies is likewise important to explore in comparison to Whitman. Whitman's speaker watches the expansion of proto-modern technologies with relatively little historical context. To modify Gramsci's famous statement, Whitman's speaker is witnessing the old world in labor while the new world, he imagines, is being born. Whether the old world is dying he cannot know, but the guarded nature of his address seems to suggest suspicion.

Zawacki's speaker—being highly aware of the extent to which modern technologies have been used to enact warfare and other forms of violence—must constantly acknowledge his historical position. One way he does this is by invoking outmoded technologies, like the titular videotape. By engaging with media—analog tape, film photography, radio—regarded as obsolete, of the past, Zawacki signals awareness of his historicity. Many of today's most commonplace technologies were invented to increase the efficiency of military violence; radar, radio, the jet engine, digital photography, and the internet all share roots in warfare. This history is not lost on Zawacki, who approaches technology with a pragmatic, yet uneasy, acceptance.

There's an element of nostalgic sentimentality at work here, too. It's easy to feel wistful for technologies of the past, especially in an era when those technologies face obsolescence with such speed and regularity. Who can help but find some pathos in the plight of Betamax or LaserDisc? I was born too late to have personal experience with either platform, a fact that strikes me, pathetic fallacy or not, as somewhat tragic.

This nostalgic attitude saturates *Videotape*. Poetry thrives on wistfulness, absence, tragedy; it loves quirks, irreconcilable tensions, fatal flaws. We, as readers, might harbor tender feelings toward the analog line-glitches of VHS or the auditory snow from an out-of-range radio station. But it's undeniable that many of these same technologies have caused, and continue to cause, extensive suffering. Obsolete technologies offer fertile ground to engage with all the above poetic attributes, an affordance on which Zawacki's poetics in *Videotape* is founded. And our fondness for outmoded technologies (as well as our attraction to cutting-edge novelties) creates an irreconcilable tension with the horrors they have caused. In Zawacki's poetics of the human-technological relationship, this conflict is the driving force.

Videotape: Form and Structure

In referring to the individual units of text that each occupy one page of *Videotape*, the word “poem” may not be accurate. While each page features a section of arranged text that centers around a set of ideas, it is unclear whether these sections of text are meant to stand alone. They are untitled, generally non-narrative—closer to landscape paintings than stories—and often reference images that bleed into surrounding pages, where members of a shared image-family may reappear, if altered. On one page Zawacki references imagery of flying creatures and rich light—a waltz is “wingèd,” the speaker describes the “arc of / afternoon” when the sunlight is warm and he is “phoe- / nixed” by the face of his beloved, intertwining imagery of fire and flight—and on the next page he begins with flying “cicadas telexing om, om” and describes a “blazon by dusk,” which references the reductive and misogynistic tropes of the sonnet tradition as well as both the late afternoon and the fiery associations of “blaze” within “blazon” (18-19). The pages could stand alone, but they are coupled.

The only clearly distinct sections of *Videotape* are the collection’s four paired “tracks” (to borrow a word from analog audio recording), “Errormirror,” “Lumièrethèque,” (Tracks A and B, respectively), and “Glassscape,” and “Zerogarden,” (the second pair of A and B Tracks). Each pair of tracks shares a distinct formal approach and mode of address and provides a more complete poetic argument than its composite page-units. In this sense, it may be most accurate to refer to each track of the collection as an individual poem. However, to preserve clarity of analysis regarding the larger concerns of this essay, I will consider Zawacki’s single-page units as standalone poems.

In *Videotape*'s A Tracks, "Errormirror" and "Glassscape," lines are scattered across the page like bursts of clear speech among radio static, and individual words within those lines are broken and hyphenated, sometimes to the point of near incomprehensibility. The track names reflect some of this interest in semantic fracturing; "Errormirror" repeats the difficult-to-pronounce "rror" sound that American English speakers often slur into a single "rrr," suggesting an awareness of the break between written language and verbal communication, and the image of the Errormirror evokes a technological glitch in literal and figurative reflection. "Glassscape" has a similar effect with its odd triple "s" and the image it evokes of an uncannily smooth and shiny landscape, as if purged of its natural imperfections.

In "Glassscape," Zawacki refers to the "Lite-Brite stars" of the "onset of night" as "my far & / fallaway sh / adowsh / ekinah," further indenting each consecutive line to disrupt the eye as it travels across the fragmented language (68). The result is extremely difficult to read but offers intriguing suggestions about the function and association of language. To many readers, myself included, the "Lite-Brite" brand name may be associated with childhood nostalgia for what is ultimately cheap plastic stuck to the ceiling. The guarded warmth of this association is contrasted against the more romantic description of "the onset of night," a comparatively high poetic voice that might not typically acknowledge the poetic potential in the Lite-Brite name. This high poetic voice also establishes the sense of nostalgia for times past that "Lite-Brite" reinforces, another example of the technological nostalgia that helps to create tension in the poems. At the same time, the anti-Poetic cheapness of "Lite-Brite" calls into question the value of "the onset of night." What sense is to be trusted? Nostalgia or cynicism? "My far & / fallaway sh / adowsh / ekinah" seems to suggest both. "My far & / fallaway" calls to mind Romantic odes to lovers (or the night sky) in its alliteration and assonance, but at second glance, "fallaway" does

not come from Romantic prosody but from basketball slang, where it describes a type of shot where the shooter jumps backward, away from the basket. “Shadowshekinah” would be an inventive enough word on its own, combining “shadow” with the English transliteration of the Hebrew word for “dwelling,” suggesting that the sky is a kind of darker, inverted home to the wistful Earthling onlooker. But Zawacki goes further, breaking the word into three lines of increasing indentation, eliminating first-glance meaning by making it nearly unrecognizable. Instead of first making meaning from “shadowshekinah,” the reader first considers the “sh” as it parallels “adowsh” and “ekinah,” the repetition of hard consonants and open vowels signaling a shared linguistic root among the mysterious language-fragments, as if they come from some ancient and unknown tongue. Only then can the reader consider the received meaning of the phrase, translating the language, which has been fractured and redistributed like data on a corrupted hard drive, into recognizable terms. The nostalgic gaze toward the imagined and misremembered past therefore coexists with the cynical awareness of its contrivance. In this way, Zawacki borrows language from high and low, new and old, creating the effect of poetry compiled from found sources by some indiscriminate machine. There’s also a clear interest in semiotics and the philosophy of meaning-making at work, particularly in the cascading, scattered A Tracks, which I’ll discuss at length later in this essay.

The collection’s A Tracks, with the glassy and technological perfection of their names and the fragmented, caustic character of their forms, are offset in name and form by the B Tracks, “Lumièrethèque” and “Zerogarden.” The B Tracks seem to refer to distinct areas within Zawacki’s technologically constructed landscape, a “place of light” and a plot of digital land, respectively. Whereas the A Tracks seem more conceptual, lacking a clear referent (What, and where, is an errormirror? A glassscape is more clearly physical, but still refers to a general,

unplaced physical space.), the B Tracks are spatially situated, at least in name. A lumièrethèque might be a place where a spectator goes to appreciate light, in the way they might visit a discothèque to dance or hear music. And a zerogarden could be a space of digital or virtual cultivation where a zerogardener simultaneously communes with simulated nature and exerts influence over it.

Poems in the collection's B Tracks take the form of completely uniform prose blocks, each exactly four lines long, aligned to the bottom of the page. They create a strong visual contrast against the visually scattered forms of the A Tracks. Their appearance on the page also reflects the collection's site-specific interest in analog tape, as if the prose blocks are being drawn horizontally by a pair of reels just beyond the margins of either page. The Track B poems are almost all end-stopped, which can be seen to contrast with the ongoing nature of analog recordings, where grammatical sentences are digital compressions of reality, dividing the continuous into a digestible, if lossy, format. By the same token, the end-stops are also an affordance of the tape-like prose block, where the visual form on the page enacts the ongoingness of analog media, which relieves some pressure from the language itself, enabling the grammatical sentences. The only Track B poem that ends without a period is, fittingly, the last one in the collection, which ends on the image of the moon "stuck to the film stock—here [,]" (my comma) which neatly captures many of the collection's key concerns (108). There's the analog medium of film photography being used to describe the natural landscape, tying into Zawacki's technological interest, but also a direct situation for the landscape: here. "Here" is ongoing and ever-changing, as designated by an unpaired em dash and a lack of punctuation, but it's also immediate to the speaker's surrounding environment. Throughout the collection, the

speaker meanders in and out of places and non-places, constantly searching, constantly dislocated, until he settles, in the last poem, in this opening, the analog "here."

Zawacki and Ammons

Zawacki has spoken in interviews about A.R. Ammons's influence on his work in *Videotape*, especially through the site-specific form and "daily routine" of Ammons's writing in his 1965 book *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, which takes the form of a daily journal spanning from December 6, 1963 to January 10, 1964 (Zawacki).

At a glance, the formal parallels are apparent. The "A Tracks" of *Videotape* appear to cascade caustically down the page, breaking lines mid-word, sporadically indented and aligned to either side of a set of narrow-spaced margins. *Tape for the Turn of the Year* behaves similarly, having been typewritten onto a single roll of adding-machine paper only an inch or two wide. In Ammons's case, many of the enjambments are a result of the physical limitations of his medium. In *Tape*'s entry for December 14, Ammons observes that "every time the roll turns / it speeds up: as the / diameter decreases, the / revolutions per foot (rpf) / increase …," breaking lines on the unorthodox "as the" and "decreases, the" (59); these enjambments are presumably due to the poet running out of space on the narrow tape, judging from the way the lines extend nearly all the way across the narrow page.

There are likewise many occasions where Ammons breaks lines for poetic effect rather than formal necessity. Later in the December 14 entry, Ammons describes how the unrolling form of the poem "should rise to a pitch of / unwinding / at the end," where "unwinding" is placed on its own, left-justified, while "at the end" is indented on the next line. This type of enjambment is engaged in the free-verse tradition of breaking lines for visual and rhythmic emphasis, placing pressure on "unwinding" and the way it characterizes both the physical form of the poem and the nature of associations in poetic expression. The indentation of the following

line indicates that "at the end" belongs to the same line of argument as "unwinding" and that the poet has broken the line intentionally, for visual and sonic effect.

Ammons's earlier description of "rpf," aside from injecting some understated comedy into *Tape*, which might otherwise risk bludgeoning the reader with its meandering meditations on poetics and the Muse, emphasizes the mechanics of the medium. As he writes, the text occupies more of the unfurled tape, and the remaining tape on the roll grows constantly smaller, revolving faster and faster as it goes. This accelerating revolution evokes scientific and technological progress, which concepts rely on the notion of constant and exponential growth over infinite time. The only problem, as Ammons's form suggests, is what happens when the roll runs out. In this way, *Tape* engages with some of the same concerns as Zawacki, regarding environmental collapse and the contradictions of late-stage capitalism.

The text of *Tape* likewise indicates that Ammons is engaged with these same concerns, although less directly than Zawacki is in *Videotape*. Ammons discusses, for example, the way modern social hierarchies create "unity / by the elimination of / difference" where "the pleasure / of the order is shared by / many / but the cost / falls on a few" (26). He speaks abstractly, but in a poem populated by cities and typewriters, job searches and frying porkchops, we can reasonably infer that he's questioning the ethics of a specifically American capitalist society, although a more radical poet might argue that the "cost / falls on the many." Ammons similarly engages with science and technology later in the same entry, where he observes the way the sun casts a shadow on the wall of his hand holding a lit cigarette and considers the scientific causality of the "vast, immediate, hot / body" of the sun "touching me: / the sustaining / chemistries that / separate it from me: / plankton, grass, pears / apples, cows: steaks / holding heat / the vessels of heat" (30). Ammons, a trained biologist and one-time industrial executive, is familiar with the

process by which scientific language reduces multitudinous experience into comprehensible sets of mechanical relationships. He recognizes, as a poet, the complex aesthetic phenomenon of sitting in a sunbeam, watching the shadow of smoke curl up the wall. But he also understands, as a scientist, the way such phenomena can be simplified, reduced to their lowest common denominator—in this case, heat—to be understood and thereby manipulated. In order to produce steak as a commodity, a cattle farmer must understand the relationships between the sun and the grass, the grass and the cow, and the necessary heat that unites them. To understand the world through the lens of scientific and technological modeling—which is to say, through language—is to enact violence on it, to reduce its variety to predictable terms. The results of this violence, however, are the dazzling achievements of human ambition, one source of poetic wonder for Ammons. This tension between violence and progress is central to Ammons's project in *Tape* as well as Zawacki's in *Videotape*.

At a glance, however, *Tape* is more of a daily journal than a fever-pitch manifesto. For every philosophical consideration of how "empty places / make room / for / silence to / gather," Ammons provides contrast: "I hear the / porkchops frying!" (131-132). Aside from the undulating subject matter, Ammons's site-specific lineation is perhaps most active in reinforcing the sense of quotidian ongoingness in *Tape*, rather than being a matter of conspicuous control on the poet's part, but Zawacki seems to recognize a larger potential in the form, which was "instrumental to setting the vertical A tracks" that drift down and across the pages of *Videotape*.

Conceptually, while *Tape* addresses in part the dilemma of literally fitting poetry into the economic quantification implied by the adding-machine tape, *Videotape*, encompassing a series of late-capitalist landscapes, seems more concerned with the erosion and ongoing obsolescence of what's ultimately a more advanced and beguiling form of Ammons's medium: videotape

itself. In the A-track poem on page 21, Zawacki refers to "a split- / screen track, in 8 / mm or Beta- / max: a trace / of how it / was & when & / nothing to play it on," enjambing lines in various indentations across the narrow space of the poem in a way reminiscent of Ammons's lineation. By breaking the line mid-compound word in "a split- / screen track," Zawacki both describes a glitchy videotape in one of two obsolete formats as well as the lapse, or split, in electronically assisted memory that such obsolescence ushers in, as signaled by the poem's final lamentation, "nothing to play it on." Where Ammons's enjambments are often due to the necessary restriction of his medium, Zawacki employs a similar technique to investigate the critical and emotional stakes of recorded media. As *Tape for the Turn of the Year* suggests, the book itself is not immune to this consideration.

Also notable about Ammons's style is his unorthodox use of the colon, a practice that Zawacki adopts and modifies in *Videotape*. In poetry, at least in the modernist tradition, the colon is often understood as a strong directive gesture: here is the idea, the image! Ashbery, for instance, writes in "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape" that "From livid curtain's hue, a tangram emerges: a country." The language is delightfully nonsensical, but the colon enacts its ordinary meaning. "A country" is the tangram that emerges "from livid curtain's hue." The directive gesture stands.

For Ammons (and Zawacki), however, the colon works not so much as a professor's pointing toward the answer as a traffic cop's stopping and waving on. In an interview with Jim Stahl, Ammons explains that colons "seem to carry [the poem] off, promote it from piece to piece to piece, and I like that kind of evenness and consistency, texture" (54). This pause and promotion is on display in *Tape*, where the colon breaks up language, marking caesuras and pivot-points in image or stream of thought. In the entry for 14 December, where the poet

bizarrely compares the "innermost feeling" of his poetic impulse to a childhood memory of witnessing a stallion ejaculate, he describes "the rich pouring / of this verbal / itch: / I fall back: / shot: / winded: / God, relieved, sweet / floating relief" (65). Here, rather than using the directive colon commonly seen in modern and contemporary poetry, Ammons uses the colon primarily to pause and punctuate the language. "Shot" does not respond to "I fall back" in the same way that Ashbery's "a country" responds to "a tangram emerges:." Although Ammons's colon does retain some directive quality, this quality is primarily founded on the reader's expectations of the role of the colon, rather than on its actual function in the text. Instead, as Ammons suggests, the colon mostly serves to promote the progress of the poem.

The notions of progress and promotion are difficult to separate from the modernist conceptions of economy and machinery that inform them. This aspect of the colon is also at work in *Tape*, where its stop-start evenness parallels the mechanical motion of the typewriter Ammons describes himself sitting at to write the long poem. At the same time, the colons reinforce the sense of progress and order prescribed by the adding-machine tape on which the poem is written; the technologies of progress are impossible without the requisite technology of accounting. All the while, Ammons invokes the Muse and ponders the necessarily unproductive poetic impulse. The comical impossibility of reconciling the mechanical logic of *Tape*'s medium with its humanistic or metaphysical content is a key aspect of the tension that gives the book life, and Ammons's use of the colon is essential to this tension.

In *Videotape*, Zawacki is concerned with many of the same issues that Ammons addresses in *Tape*, albeit through an updated lens. Both collections are site-specific; Ammons's adding-machine tape encourages the poet to consider the relationship between poetry and the technology of industry, such as "the sustaining / chemistries" that cattle farmers employ, while

Zawacki's technological landscapes are filtered through the form and logic of updated media of obsolescence, such as VHS tape or Betamax, as a way of entering a similar investigation of the poet's place in a technologically mediated world, even as that world constantly decays.

With this line of similarity drawn, it follows that, in *Videotape*, the colon could serve a similar but updated function to that of Ammons's colon in *Tape*. Even at a glance, there's a clear resemblance, especially in *Videotape*'s cascading A Tracks. Zawacki describes "The linear archive invisible, set / to an E- / Z listening channel, a / prosthetic repertoire: formatted / to the bandwidth of / a basement session," the colon serving more to promote than to direct (21). The "linear archive" of histories stored on "8 / mm or Beta- / max" are invisible, both because of the nature of their medium—you can't watch them with the naked eye—and their obsolescence, the technical impossibility of playing them back. The exact image the passage depicts is veiled, but the obsolete tape formats seem to be in conversation with the "basement session," which calls to mind some high school rock band's dingy studio set up in a generous parent's basement, kids recording songs and music videos prior to the advent of digital audio workstations capable of turning a laptop into a major-label mixing board.

The scene is scored with Muzak, an antiquated "prosthetic repertoire" of sentimentally repackaged versions of familiar songs that serve to further alienate the speaker-as-audience from the archive they wish to access. Here the colon functions similarly to how a comma might function in other poetry. "Formatted" is not proposed as the consequent to the antecedent of "prosthetic repertoire;" the colon between them simply allows the reader to pause as Zawacki shifts descriptive mode. This shift allows for a promotion of the poem's argument much like the effect Ammons describes in the interview.

In the context of *Videotape*'s larger concerns with technological waste, erosion, and obsolescence, however, the colon seems to take on a digital quality, a kind of cut between lyric scenes. The shift between "prosthetic repertoire" and "formatted / to the bandwidth of / a basement session" advances the argument of the poem, allowing Zawacki to pivot from a presentation of sound ("E- / Z listening channel") via the speaker's mediation ("a / prosthetic repertoire") to the speaker's mediation ("formatted / to the bandwidth of / a basement session") of a new visual presentation ("a split- / screen track, in 8 / mm or Beta- / max"). Here the colon denotes a cut from one mode of sensory presentation to another, with the speaker's mediation acting as a buffer between them. Where Ammons's colon in *Tape* works with a mechanical efficiency to promote the stream of ideas and images, Zawacki's colon in *Videotape* promotes the argument with a subtlety and precision more typical of digital technologies. Ammons writes with a typewriter; Zawacki writes with a MacBook.

Zawacki and Palmer

In an interview with Barbara Claire Freeman, Zawacki describes his unease about "writing from personal concerns," and that his "permission to try it out" in *Videotape* "came from rereading Michael Palmer's poems for his daughter Sarah," where the poems are both "about a child and … seemingly co-constructed by her as well."

There is a clear connection between poems like Palmer's "Song of the Round Man" and several of Zawacki's untitled serial poems in *Videotape* that address the speaker's daughter, in the way they both display tenderness toward the beloved subject without primarily "writing from personal concerns" by incorporating larger philosophical interests. I'll now try to offer a rough outline of a few ways that Palmer enacts these concerns in "Song" as priming for identifying similar concerns in *Videotape*.

"Song," inscribed with the epigraph "for Sarah when she's older," describes a "round and sad-eyed man" who "puffed cigars as if / he were alive" (Palmer 30). The language is plain-spoken and largely comprises compact syllables reminiscent of children's-book writing. The image of a "round and sad-eyed man" with "gillyflowers / to the left of the apple, purple bells to the right / and a grass-covered hill behind" at first seems nonsensical or purely surreal, but the in context of the child-like language and epigraph, it reveals itself as descriptive of a child's (Sarah's) drawing: a shaky outline of a man, an apple, some generic flowers, and a hillside, archetypes of childhood doodles. In this sense, "Song" is literally "co-constructed" by the child to which the poem is addressed.

This discourse between the speaker and the daughter foregrounds a sense of tenderness in the poem, but, as Zawacki points out, it does so without losing track of Palmer's recurring concerns with linguistic slippage and semiotic instability. In the essay "Michael Palmer's Altered

Words," the critic Thomas Gardner argues that Palmer's poetry is "alive in the thickness of language" where meaning is complex and unreliable, constantly moving (238). Gardner references Palmer's essay "Counter-Poetics and Current Practice," where Palmer proposes the concept of the "analytic lyric" as a way to "address the problematics of a purely private utterance," a radical approach that breaks with the lyric tradition wherein the principal activity of the poem is the poet's cultivation of an evolving poetic self and turns that same affordance instead toward the cultivation of an evolving relationship with language and meaning. Gardner:

> The lyric's leaps and stutters and musical thinking, its exploration of language's fragility have traditionally been used to make visible subtle shifts within a speaker's voice or personality; Palmer proposes that such attentive, exploratory work might also serve to renew everyday language, increasing its signifying capacity. (238)

This is precisely the work Palmer performs in "Song," where the most obvious semiotic slippage is between the unstable signifier of the visualized drawing of the round man and the signifier of the written phrase "round man." Sarah's (we assume) drawing only abstractly resembles the scene that the speaker interprets the drawing to depict. As with most children's drawings, it has seemingly been created without a particular referent. There is no one "round man" or specific landscape that Sarah has sought to portray; instead, she has drawn from her childhood idea of the elements that make up a picture—a figure, a landscape—and sought to depict them through simple forms—roundness. It can be understood as a picture of a round man because of the speaker's familiarity with Sarah's drawings (tenderness again) or because of a familiarity with the larger genre of childhood drawings distorting the signs they can be seen to depict. In either case, there's a profound slippage between the unstable signifier of the drawing and the similarly unstable signifier of the language that describes it. The "round man" is never identified as a child's drawing, but a reader might reasonably assume this to be the case based on the context,

which in itself relies on a presumption of the reader's familiarity with the genre of the wonky childhood drawing. In this sense, the poem emphasizes the way that we become accustomed to making meaning "in the thickness of language," where the drawing and the descriptive language are compared as parallel systems of unstable signifiers. Even in this comparison, however, there's the semiotic slippage between the physical reality of the drawing and the language that describes it; the reader's idea of "gillyflowers / to the left of the apple" or "a grass-covered hill behind" inevitably differs from the poet's idea of the image conjured by the words (Palmer 30). The idea that the poem has been created in reference to a physical object in the world emphasizes this instability by rooting the subject of the poem in a kind of ideal sign, the drawing itself.

Significant, too, is the fact that the poem reads as nonsense if interpreted in the wrong semiotic mode. The written signifier of the "round and sad-eyed man" is not semiotically connected to the physical object of the drawing in the world, so the reader might be unable to establish stable points of reference in the phrase. The nonsequitur descriptions of the "round and sad-eyed man" who has "locked [his] head in a Japanese box" make little meaning according to the traditional lyric mode; although the speaker's "I" appears later in the poem, the activity of the poem is not in the cultivation of the poetic self, but in the negotiation of the relationship between language and meaning. They also make little meaning as standalone images in the tradition of Pound or Williams. This failure of meaning-making forces the reader to either abandon the poem or find an alternative path through the thickness. The reader's most convenient option is to investigate the language itself, the ways in which it tries and fails to connect sign to signifier to signified, and the pleasurable uncertainty the reader might experience from the disconnect of the analytic lyric.

By switching interpretive mode to read primarily for image, narrative, and metaphorical activity rather than for semiotic play, the reader can identify another objective of the analytic lyric in "Song:" to critique the idea of constant change and difference within the poetic self. As Gardner suggests, in poetry, the self is typically constructed through "subtle shifts within a speaker's voice or personality" that conflict and generate the tension that drives the poem (238). In "Song," however, the shifts are anything but subtle."I am sad today … / for I have locked my head in a Japanese box / and lost the key," the round man says, which suggests that one aspect of himself has become alienated from another, almost as if his head is stuck between different trapdoors in the complex mechanism of a *himitsu-bako*, a Japanese puzzle box. This self-inflicted alienation interrogates the poetic construction of self, where the poet, through shifts in voice and personality, develops a multifaceted self defined by conflict, not continuity. Palmer's round man, through the metaphorical conflict of having locked his head in a puzzle box, has created tension with himself. Aside from his roundness, this tension—the fact that he has locked his head in a puzzle box—is the only description of the man that we receive. Like the poetic self, he's defined by self-difference.

Palmer's interrogation of poetic self goes further. As the poem advances, the round man and the speaker converse, and we learn that neither one can see the gillyflowers or the purple bells. The speaker explains that his "eyes have grown sugary and dim / from reading too long by candlelight," but the round man offers no explanation of his blindness, maybe because his head is locked inside the Japanese box (30). The speaker, like the erudite poet constructing a conflicted self, has read at such length that he can no longer see, or appreciate, the world around him, except as a collection of frail signifiers, like childhood drawings. But the speaker also cannot remember what he's read by candlelight because his "memory has grown tired and dim /

from looking at things that can't be seen / by any kind of light" (31). The poet, so concerned with abstract philosophical concepts that "can't be seen" that he can no longer perceive the immediate world, likewise can no longer remember the original significance of what he's read. The conceptual signifiers have lost all connection to the immediate world, and the poet is left adrift.

The speaker finally reveals that he, too, has locked his head in a Japanese box. Rather than simply losing the key, however, the speaker admits to having "thrown away the key," accepting blame for the poetic self-conflict that has separated him from the world (31). The round man and the speaker then realize that they are the same person, two aspects of a self, in conflict and continuity with one another "as if alive," but not alive (31). Through the self-difference necessary to cultivate a poetic self, the speaker has rendered himself an object of study, a shaky, cartoonish representation of the immediate world, surrounded by signifiers, yet dead to them. In this sense, the analytic lyric critiques both the traditional construction of poetic self and the type of avant-garde conceptual poetry that Palmer is himself practicing.

The speaker's transformation takes on another significance in the context of the poem's epigraph, "for Sarah when she's older" (30). The speaker's eyes and memory dimming can alternatively be read as symptoms of old age, foreign to Sarah during childhood, when she drew the picture the poem describes, but which will become familiar to her as she watches her father (identified with the speaker) age and as she ages herself. In this reading, the speaker's self-difference and distance from the immediate world can be read as broader symptoms of adulthood, of having become so habituated to the world that it begins to lose significance, its power to surprise. In this reading, "as if alive" suggests a more literal death, one that comes at the end of an adult life of self-difference and disconnection (31). By identifying himself with the conflicted speaker, Palmer simultaneously enacts and critiques the construction of poetic self

while meditating on aging, fatherhood, and death. At the center of this critique and meditation is Sarah's drawing, which inspired the poem and gave it a suitable habitat; the poem is both ekphrastic and collaborative.

I've now set up a few points of comparison between Palmer and Zawacki, so I'll pivot to some discussion of *Videotape*, where Zawacki displays an interest in semiotic slippage and father-daughter ekphrasis after Palmer's own.

In a poem from "Glassscape," the second Track A section, Zawacki presents a scene of a girl learning to swim, as seen through the lens of the speaker's camcorder. The swimmer, whom we can infer to be a young girl who "writhes to learn" to move through water, is regarded with a fatherly tenderness "caught on handheld" camera as "water, / like her, goes counter to / the current's pull and in con- / junction w/" (63). The comparison of the writhing swimmer to the ebb and flow of the tide reflects a loving regard similar to Palmer's when writing about his own daughter, and the fact that Zawacki's poem seems to describe a home video of his daughter engaged in the act of learning to swim parallels the way Palmer's "Song" can be read to describe an image of Sarah's engagement with learning to depict the world.

Both poems are, in a way, co-created by father and daughter, although the process of learning to swim is not concerned with semiotic relationships in the same way as is the process of learning to create art. Maybe it's fairer to say that Palmer's poem is co-created by father and daughter, while Zawacki's is created by the father in response to the poetic significance he perceives in the daughter's engagement with the landscape.

In any case, the poems' shared interest in presenting their subjects' processes of understanding the world—whether through the medium of art or physical engagement, athletics—demonstrates a shared philosophical concern with the unstable process of meaning-

making. Zawacki's poem presents a Mediterranean scene of "Aleppo / pine & olive groves in a passage / of helical scan" and "cypresses ranging / a scruffy / peak / as if hay bale twine were all / that tied them back" from falling into the swimmer's ocean (63). The pastoral imagery of trees, sun, cliffs, and ocean situate the poem clearly, but the speaker's editorializations remind us that the meaning of this poetic setting is slippery. The "helical scan" refers to the mechanical process by which video is recorded onto the magnetic tape of the speaker's camcorder, but "helical" also suggests a spiraled visual pattern in the trees' placement in the scene or an etymological bleeding-over—"*Helios*"—from the poem's earlier description of the sun. The cypresses enact this same kind of meaning-bleeding, held in place on the cliff as if by tenuous string. Depending on the speaker's physical and poetic perspective, the sun can be "a disco ball" or "a bulb," and the clouds can figure as "a lean-to with least to lean / against" (63). Aside from the cloud-like lightness suggested by the image of a lean-to leaning against nothing or the sunny glow implied by the image of a bulb or disco ball, these comparisons reflect an interest in the slipperiness of meaning similar to that of Palmer. As demonstrated by the enjambments that emphasize individual words or musical phrases by removing them from the regulated meaning-making of syntax, Zawacki's poem guides the reader to savor the distinct sense of each word or phrase before stacking them up into permuted meaning. We can read foremost for the sound and feel of language, for "cypresses ranging / a scruffy / peak / as if hay bale twine were all / that tied them back," where the lineation singles out "a scruffy / peak" on the right-hand margin, which fracturing works in part to disconnect the reader from the meaning-making process of ordinary language in the same way that Palmer's nonsense imagery does (63). It facilitates delight in language, removed from interpreted meaning. We can also read for the summarized, interpolated meaning of the language, the trees on the cliff that look like they would fall if it weren't for some

invisible string holding them up. The various semiotic modes of reading at work here reflect Palmer's interest in language's thickness.

In Zawacki's poem, however, the logic of the analytic lyric is turned away from critiquing the poet's construction of self and toward the poet's construction of the landscape (Zawacki's use of technical and technological language is essential to this critique); in this sense, *Videotape* could be described as a book of analytic eclogues.

The poem ends with the speaker's reflection on the footage of the daughter learning to swim, comparing her movements to those of the ocean: "water / like her, goes counter to / the current's pull & in con- / junction / w/" (63). This landing summarizes both the poem's interest in the slipperiness of meaning and the speaker's tender regard for the swimmer. The fragmenting of "like her, goes counter to" and "the current's pull & in con-" distance the reader from the interpolated meaning of the language and foreground its sonic feel by breaking up common syntactical units. The same fragmenting, once parsed for meaning, enacts a tension between the "water" on the right margin and the swimmer who "goes counter to" on the left. At the same time, however, the syntax of "water / like her, goes counter to" likens the swimmer to the water. The suggested meaning of the form is in tension with the suggested meaning of the syntax. This tension is further established in the poem's closing lines, where the swimmer both resists "the current's pull" and moves "in con- / junction / w/" it. Again, sound is most immediate, but the language is carefully arranged for tension of meaning. The swimmer both resists the current and moves with it, like the water, which is also situated in tension with the water. The swimmer, the water, and the current coexist in an uneasy give-and-take, much like the clouds' "lean-to with least to lean / against." The relationship is summarized by "in con- / junction / w/," where emphasis is placed on "junction" by splitting the common phrase into different lines. This

relationship is a crossroads, a meeting of distinct and separate elements. The swimmer's messy writhing is a physical manifestation of the constant struggle between body and landscape, and various aspects of the landscape—clouds, trees, water—with others—sun, cliffs, currents. At the center of this struggle is the poet himself, who struggles to present the tension he perceives via the slippery, buggy technology of language. And, of course, there's the loving regard at the center of it all, the proud and worried father filming his daughter on camcorder as she learns to swim, who was so moved by the drama of the moment that he was compelled to immortalize in a poem, semiotic messiness included. The poem reveals some of Palmer's clearest influence on Zawacki in *Videotape*, and it's also one of the collection's best, full-stop, capturing Zawacki's philosophical concerns with semiotics and technology and language while remaining sonically engaged in the thickness of language, its tension on all levels, inspired by a moment of tender regard.

Conclusion

Videotape is a metaphorically rich medium situated at the crossroads of analog and digital recording technology. The interplay between these two recording formats gives context to the technological tensions that undergird Zawacki's work in *Videotape*.

Put simply, analog videotape (e.g. VHS) attempts to record the world as it is, without digital compression. Lines of data are recorded onto the tape using an ongoing magnetic field that can be converted into a video signal and replayed; there is a direct correlation between the data collected through the lens and what is recorded to the tape. Because of this directness, the tape can only pick up so much. The world is analog, ongoing, like the analog format of the tape, but the tape's storage is severely limited, unable to capture the fullness of the images that pass through the lens. As a result, it records only a pale sketch of the world it takes in.

Digital videotape (e.g. MiniDV) emerged after the advent of analog videotape technologies but before fully digital compact discs became dominant. Digital videotape thus employs an odd combination of digital compression and analog recording. It does not seek to capture the full scope of the world, but instead digitally divides it into comprehensible pieces, making assumptions to fill in gaps along the way. The tape itself remains analog, but the computer that aids in its recording uses digital technology to compress the data into manageable units of storage, allowing the tape to record vastly more information. This increase in storage capacity translates to clearer video that captures the world with greater perceived accuracy. But this accuracy is, to an extent, illusory: much of the genuine article has been lost to compression. Whereas analog videotape tries and fails to record the world faithfully, digital videotape captures a beguiling oversimplification.

With this distinction and tension in mind, we can see some of the ways that *Videotape* acts at the intersection of the analog and the digital. As I mentioned, the world itself is analog, defined by change, entropy, and unpredictability over ongoing time. Language, in contrast, is an early digital technology, meant to simplify, streamline, and compress the experience of the world in order to make meaning. Language, of course, is essential to poetry, an art that makes the world meaningful by capturing our experience of the world without reducing its complexities. While poetry needs tension to thrive, it cannot engage with all the world's tension simultaneously, because this would be like trying to record the fullness of the world onto analog tape; it would quickly fill its storage capacity, its ability to capture and replay meaningfully. Instead, making sense of full-scale tension through small-scale modeling is one of the principal poetic activities.

In seeking to distill—or compress—the world into meaningful small-scale models, poetry enacts violence on the world. It distorts, conflates, misconstrues. The compressed model produced by language cannot account for the incomprehensible detail of the real thing. It must make assumptions, take averages, and fill in gaps. This self-tension is one of the driving forces behind the poetic activity of modeling the world: language, as a digital medium, is lossy. It takes what it needs, what it can store, leaving the rest behind.

In this sense, any poetics is a poetics of technology, the tension between the meaning of what's said and the violence of what's omitted. What distinguishes poetry that specifically addresses technology from other poetries is the extent to which this tension is foregrounded.

In the case of *Videotape*, that extent is considerable and multifaceted. The technologically informed language Zawacki uses to describe the world acknowledges an awareness of the tension between the analog and the digital, the way any gesture of poetic naming is a technological imposition on the world. This imposition is intertwined with various types of

violence: the description-as-destruction inherent to language, but also environmental collapse, warfare, and mass violence enabled by technological aids. The awareness of various types of violence can be seen in the genre of Zawacki's analytic eclogues, where the landscape is regarded through a technological lens as it glitches and decays like old and dirty videotape. In this respect, his work can be placed in conversation with that of Whitman, who adopts an optimistic stance in his address of the technological future as a means of insulating himself against the horror of what such a future might mean. For Zawacki, that future is damningly familiar.

Zawacki's investigation of technology goes deeper than vocabulary and mode of address, however, probing slippages of meaning and unstable signifiers in the tradition of Michael Palmer. "Alive in the thickness of language," Zawacki demonstrates a shared interest with Palmer in asking the reader to consider how the technology of language makes meaning, as well as where it fails to do so (Gardner 238). Whereas Palmer investigates semantics and semiotics through nonsensical imagery and broken or absent narratives, Zawacki enlists technological comparisons and fragmented forms. In Palmer's analytic lyrics, the types of addresses that traditionally construct a poetic self are turned inward, through a lack of perceived sense, to critique the very concept of self-construction. Zawacki's analytic eclogues contrast modes of description, using technological language to address the natural landscape as well as technical language from the natural sciences to address non-natural human constructions. Through the tension created by this disparity of descriptive mode, Zawacki investigates the fragile distinctions of a digital technology such as language, the ways that categories can be disrupted when populated with incongruous elements. Zawacki's caustic Track A forms inform this

disruption by breaking words into their composite parts, revealing new suggestions of meaning and surprising etymologies hidden in the data of language.

Another integral element of *Videotape* is its site-specificity and quotidian routine, which Zawacki continues from A.R. Ammons. Zawacki's concern with tape recording comes after Ammons's in *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, a book-length poem typewritten onto a single roll of adding-machine tape, which takes the form of daily journal entries. Its site-specific approach introduces questions of poetic utility as well as its interface with technology and economics. By directly addressing later technological recording formats, Zawacki picks up Ammons's baton and the tensions between art and economics that come with it. Zawacki's speaker is familiar with the close relationship that technological advances share with both art and violence—videotape facilitates both video art and mass surveillance—which raises the question: what to make of the fundamental technology of language, with its bearing on both poetry and all proceeding forms of violence? Zawacki does not offer a clear answer, but the daily routine of his practice, where sunlight creeping through a window and rain at a truck stop are sufficient occasions for poetry, suggest that, while technologically enabled suffering may be ubiquitous, so is aesthetic beauty.

Zawacki keeps this duality in mind throughout *Videotape* through the inclusion of revealing moments of tenderness. Much of the collection is devoted to considerations of the landscape through complex and technical language; these are hard poems, in all senses of the word. But they rarely feel callous. Zawacki consistently justifies his philosophical inquiries with brief glimpses into the emotional investments that inspire them—plants in coffee cans on the windowsill; the speaker sitting on a riverbank pining after his absent beloved; his daughter struggling as she learns to swim. These glimpses remind us of the utopian origins of dystopian technologies: most instruments of mass suffering were first envisioned as tools of liberation. The

poet enters an uneasy relationship with technology due in large part to this final tension. On the one hand, emerging technologies represent exciting new affordances for expression; on the other hand, familiarity with past technologies reminds the poet how easily they are corrupted. Zawacki, by interrogating the intersection of the analog and the digital, the real and the artificial, and the blurriness of the boundaries between them, maintains a sense of balanced unease.

Zawacki's unstable position reminds me of Whitman's vision of modern Manhattan, the possibilities and perils emerging technologies seemed to represent for the spiritual life of the future: "You furnish your parts toward eternity, / Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul" (9:31-32). Unlike the fleeting technologies, whether digital or analog, that Zawacki considers in *Videotape*, poetry is unlikely to become obsolete. It is both too elemental and too adaptable to disappear; while videotape reaches out to capture the world, poetry, as Whitman suggests, simply reaches out.

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