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Back to the Garden: Queer Ecology in Samuel Delany's *Heavenly Breakfast*

Tavia Nyong'o*

Although Samuel Delany is best known, as a memoirist, for *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988) and *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (2001), this essay considers his first work in this genre, *Heavenly Breakfast: An Essay on the Winter of Love* (1979). Named after the folk music group and commune to which Delany belonged from 1967 to 1968, the memoir intersperses notes taken from that tumultuous period with recollections composed a decade later. Reading the memoir today—amidst an ecological crisis and a stagnating mainstream LGBT politics—sets into play yet another circuit of memory and recollection. Although not nature writing, Delany's memoir supplies instructive instances of what Timothy Morton calls the “ambient poetics” of the counterculture's valorization of the pastoral (*Ecology without Nature* 32–54). Delany renders the environment of countercultural communal life, musicking, and polymorphous sexuality through literary techniques Morton identifies with ecomimesis, such as the medial, the timbral, and the Aeolian. These techniques offer the nascent interdisciplinary discourse of *queer ecology* a genealogy in music, sex, and alternative world-making.¹ Delany's literary and sexual ecologies “without nature” provide a way of pursuing the utopian spirit of the musical and sexual subcultures of the sixties without necessarily seeking pathways “back to the garden” (Mitchell, *Ladies*). From within the milieu of free love often retrospectively associated with white middle-class heterosexuality, Delany developed literary strategies for estranging the romance with nature, supplying terms

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for a more robust and inclusive contemporary ecological imagination. One consequence of this estrangement is a different orientation toward the rendering of race within ecological contexts, a difference that I argue is queer.

1

“We are stardust. / We are golden,” Joni Mitchell sang of the 1969 Woodstock festival. “And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden” (*Ladies*). Mitchell’s naive couplet renders an indelible image of the counterculture’s pastoral sublime, intensified by the song’s copious use of the first-person plural and Mitchell’s piercing melismatic scat that extends the penultimate “garden.” “Rendering,” Morton writes, “attempts to simulate reality itself: to tear to pieces the aesthetic screen that separates the perceiving subject from the object. The idea is that we obtain an *immediate* world, a directly perceived reality beyond our understanding” (35). “Woodstock” renders stardust into a figure for life beyond the limits of time and space, creed and color, and calls for an effort to restore Eden, or, in some versions of the song, its “semblance.”² That the lyric derives not from actual experience of Woodstock but only Mitchell’s vicarious desire to have been there only adds further color and texture to how the song at once renders countercultural ecotopia and “re-marks” it, calling attaching to the song as itself only an echo (Morton 48). That vicariousness gives the song’s ironical boast that “By the time we got to Woodstock, / We were half a million strong” a pointed significance that many a boxed set, documentary film, TV anniversary special, or 25th anniversary commemorative concert lacks, especially for those born too late to have been there. Like the echo of self-doubt on later versions of the song, in which Mitchell specifies our destination as some semblance of the garden, her composing the song in a hotel room in New York “glued to the media” (Ruhlman) coverage of an event that paternalistic sexism had prevented her from performing at, makes her Woodstock peculiarly ours, insofar as the “garden” that “we” have to find our way back to is as vicariously drawn to her as it to us (Mitchell, *Miles*). It remarks her original rendering as high camp, as a way of being in love with a perverse artifice it cannot stop mistaking for the real.

A camp reading of Mitchell’s “Woodstock” affords an unexpectedly useful route into a reading of Delany’s own perverse affinities for a literary artifice posing as naturalism. While Delany is not often associated with the Woodstock generation, during the heady years of 1967 and 1968 he was deeply involved in

countercultural experiments with communal living, sexual liberation, racial and gender egalitarianism, and the folk music revival. Indeed, Salim Washington has pointed out that the place of both “music and musical *thinking*” is an under-examined aspect of Delany’s work (238). Washington italicizes *thinking* to register dissent from the modern mind/body dualism that consigns black musicking to the realm of the emotions and the instincts. This dualism, he argues, undermines attention to music’s function in Delany’s fictions “as an instrument capable of transforming reality and facilitating the tasks of those who wield it” (239). Washington is among the critics who understandably seek to secure a racial reading of Delany.³ Musicking is a machine in the garden, a technology of the self and others. However, the paraliterary genres in which much of Delany’s oeuvre has been written—science fiction, fantasy, and pornography—present some challenges to a musical interpretation secured to any naturalistic or realist reading of race. If music writing is believed to refer to a shared, audible world of sound, to what world can paraliterary music writing be taken to correspond? We are deceived if we imagine that his otherworldly visions can be brought back to earth through musical analysis, since nothing in the text endows the audible with a greater verisimilitude than the other senses.⁴ From Delany’s fictions, we can derive a first principle for reading his nonfictions: music supplies no direct route to the reliably mimetic representation of racial difference, any more than skin color does.

But if not a direct route, an indirect one, perhaps a semblance of one? Queer ecology offers one the means for interpreting the “stranger intimacies,” as Nayan Shah calls them (1–16), that queer of color critique is increasingly preoccupied with, insofar as, Morton argues, “Desire is inescapable in an ecology that values intimacy with strangers over holistic belonging” (“Queer Ecology” 279). This emphasis on stranger intimacy differs from the emphasis other scholars place on the racial implications of evolutionary and proto-environmentalist thought. In their introduction to *Queer Ecologies* (2010), Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson offer a genealogy of sex, race, and nature rooted in nineteenth-century imperialism, colonialism, and social Darwinism (6–12). My reading of Delany suggests a more recent point of departure from 1960s counterculture, whose ideals of holistic belonging were self-consciously counterposed to the scientific visions of Darwin, Havelock Ellis, or even Alfred Kinsey. In this respect, Kevin Floyd’s reconsideration of Herbert Marcuse is a valuable historical supplement. In his germinal treatise *Eros and Civilization* (1966), which spurred a sexual revolution he expressed deep ambivalence over, Marcuse argued for the revolutionary

capacity of even “regressive” desire—such as homosexuality and polymorphous perversity—to perturb a capitalist, colonialist, and white supremacist social order. Marcuse’s dialectical investigation into how perversion and fantasy contained “the utopian power to bridge the estrangement of ‘man [sic]’ and ‘nature,’ of subject and object as such” (111), Floyd argues, was limited because the philosopher remained “more interested in utopian figures of perversion than . . . in real perverts” (114). Queer ecology shares Floyd’s interest in real perverts, seeking “open appreciation, for no particular reason, of another’s enjoyment” (Morton, “Queer Ecology” 280). Such an appreciation, I hope to show through my reading of *Heavenly Breakfast*, can contribute to a queer of color account of stranger intimacy.

Beginning with the counterculture, rather than going all the way back to the colonial period, might better allow us to track the path racialized reason takes into the present. We might consider, in this light, the original cover for the paperback edition of *Heavenly Breakfast*, which clearly accentuates Delany’s Afro-American skin tone and Afro hair, in a frontal portrait of the author surrounded by scenes of hippie musicking.⁵ In 1979, at least, this memoir of the counterculture was represented as a moment in which black America enigmatically takes center stage on the national consciousness, even as that counterculture, in turn, is presented as “the source” of the speculative “vision” producing *Dhalgren* and the Return to Nevèrÿon series. The possibility of this book cover reflects a newfound if contested prominence of black musicians and black music in the folk, jazz, and rock scenes of sixties’ and seventies’ youth culture, a perhaps obvious observation that genealogies of race grounded in earlier decades nonetheless skip over. But ignoring the allure of the hip black masculinity used to market *Heavenly Breakfast* will only result in a poorer understanding of the presence of race within countercultural discourses of ecology and free love.

This presence defies easy simplification, which is why a complex, literary text like *Heavenly Breakfast* does it such careful justice. Unlike Native Americans, African Americans did not easily fit into an appropriative white vision of the return to nature. Besides not being aboriginal to the New World, by the 60s and 70s African Americans were firmly associated with urban environments and no longer with agrarian life as had been the case until the great migration. But blackness and queerness alike perturb the holistic vision of the Summer of Love, with its pastoral and “Aeolian” poetics seeking to convey “a sense of processes continuing without a subject or an author” (Morton, *Ecology* 41). In “returning to the source of his vision,” Delany also wryly re-marks

this bucolic ambience by inventing its contrary: a “winter of love” in which the dialogic interplay between black and white, urban and rural, Woodstock, NY and New York, NY is insistently foregrounded.

The winter of love, I am suggesting, does not merely denote the specific few months covered by Delany’s memoir. It also evokes a recurring and unnatural season of the mind, a Nietzschean “thought out of season.”⁶ This is a thought that emerges out of the ecomimesis of countercultural naturalism, but, as wintry irony does to summer romance in Northrop Frye’s theory of archetypes, subjects it to a reality principle. The winter of love is self-aware enough to recognize that the ambient poetics it does not abandon can nevertheless only produce a “semblance” of the garden. This irony does not result in quietism, but in a style that oscillates between the extreme concision of *Heavenly Breakfast* and the ekphrastic mode of his later pornotopias. Both concision and ekphrasis, I suggest, are modes of minor writing in the Deleuzian sense: they “set all the constants of language in . . . continuous variation” (Bogue 32). They are, in Delany’s words, “distortions for essentially musical reasons” (2). In my longer project, I argue that these two modes operate according to a single logic which Deleuze called fabulation. Here, I restrict myself to one side of that coin: the continuous variations that Delany sets into play through terse concision, that destabilize and deterritorialize race as a linguistic and musical constant.

Concision as a literary style produces two effects Morton associates with ecomimesis: medial language (*Ecology* 36) and apophasis (45). Medial language highlights the medium of language, textuality, and typeface itself. Apophasis is a rhetorical figure highlighting what language cannot capture, the other side of the coin of mediality. Midway through the following sentence of description: “The kitchen was for visitors, cooking, eating, bathing, rehearsing—” Delany inserts a chapter break and concludes with a new sentence: “This memory interrupts” (13). The chapter break “breaks” the description, highlighting the medial character of memoir. In the preface, Delany combines mediality and apophasis when he notes “This *is* an essay. But is not journalism—save in the literal sense that most of the material was first drafted in actual journals kept at the time” (2). Telling us what his language is not—fiction—does not indicate what it is, exactly, any more than his announcement of the interruption of memory discloses the temporal origin of that disruption. If ambient poetics frequently seek to give the reader an illusion of immediacy—a feeling of “you are there”—Delany relocates that illusion to the scene of writing and recollection. We are “there” as he recollects the fragments of his drafts into

a memoir written “basically for myself” (11), a slightly misleading claim that alludes, I believe, to the subjectless “fantasy of being invisible” that Delany identifies with communal living, and for which he seeks textual approximation (21).

Illusions of immediacy and fantasies of invisibility are particularly salient in analyses of the counterculture, where the folk and the fantastic, the cosmic and the earthly commune and so frequently intermingle. This mingling, however, produces its paradoxes. If we seem to have in the counterculture a certain mythopoesis pointing outside (to nature, the stars, the golden childhood of the human race), in speculative fiction we often encounter its inverse: a series of literary excursions directed inward, into fantasy, to the unpicturable, to the pure presence of a language with no exit except that which returns us, through its circuitous folds, back to the center of its being, where we had begun. These contraries certainly do not relate, as the original cover of *Heavenly Breakfast* suggests, as simply as “vision” and “source.” But neither does speculation simply negate ecomimesis. It rather plays an essentially musical role, in the sense that Deleuze understands music’s relation to nature. As Ronald Bogue explains, for Deleuze: “The task of music is less to convert natural sounds to human sounds than to render sonorous the nonsonorous forces that play through nature, and to do so by deterritorializing the rhythmic relations of the world, transforming them, and inventing new modes for their interconnection and interaction” (30).

Music and the refrain are counterposing tendencies for Deleuze: the refrain territorializes; music deterritorializes. This tension is important to *Heavenly Breakfast*, and especially to its central scene of ecomimesis and racial reinscription, which I discuss at this essay’s conclusion. To arrive at the conclusion, we should first attempt to defend the counterintuitive claim that if there is a *life of music* in Delany’s oeuvre, then it would have nothing to do, at least directly, with the *music of life*. However appealing the prospect might be, it is not a timbrel mimesis of nature leading us back to the garden.

The selection of a memoir makes my counterintuitive task slightly easier, given the distinctive alchemy of reality and artifice manifest in that genre.⁷ Memoir is related to what Foucault termed the “parrhesiastic game in which your own life is exposed,” a form of frank truth-telling whose protocols differ from persuasive rhetoric or naturalistic mimesis (*Fearless* 17). Even as it addresses a public, the memoir—or to use the more venerable name Delany gives his work, the *essay*—is engaged in the scriptive and haptic production of truth *for* a particular self. This relationship of *Heavenly Breakfast* to truth takes the shape Foucault explores in

his late studies of “the care of the self,” as akin to an *essay*, a testing of the self for its intrinsic properties, an experimental externalization by the subject in order to render it a simultaneous object of care, adjustment, and wonder (*Care of the Self* 63). While such navel-gazing may appear inward directed—and in relation to language, it indeed is—in order to succeed it must also be conducted in the laboratory of the world. The essay is written in situ, amidst environments. And yet, to directly point to that environment, as if the reader might vicariously indulge in the same view, is to risk a problematic form of ecomimesis that spurs the thought “that there is something behind or beyond or above” the “inside-outside” distinction it deplores as distancing humans from our environment (Morton, *Ecology* 78).

Why test the limits of the “inside–outside” distinction in pursuit of an environmental ambient poetics? For members of the counterculture, the possibility of living within but against possessive individualism was at stake. The idea of the commune was born in the hope of contesting the disempowerment of the individual as producer and as consumer, by tuning in to an alternative wavelength, turning on to a series of extravagant experiences (including sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll), and dropping out of straight society in order to recreate a better environment for both self and other, which is why *Heavenly Breakfast* opens *in media res*, evoking the change of season and a bare description of spaces: “October’s end. Four rooms on the second floor of a Lower East Side tenement: bathtub in the kitchen; two pantry-sized rooms railroading off that; and a fifteen-by-twenty back room, largest in the apartment” (5).

This opener sets the tone for an ambient poetics that strives “to evoke the background *as* background” (Morton 45) and to give us an Aeolian “sense of processes continuing without a subject or an author” (41). How we arrange our lives is how we are arranged *by* our lives: the built environment shapes our sense of individual, private identity or lack thereof, with cleaning and voiding the body (“[t]he stall john in the kitchen had no door” [12]) being as communal as cooking, eating, and musicking. For the 16 or 17 people arranged in those four rooms, the intentional immersion into a milieu haunted by prior immigrant generations obliged to subsist under such conditions was an attempt to reimagine such proximity as something other than squalor, but a voluntary poverty opening up the possibility of alternative world-making.

Jayna Brown has recently reminded Delany scholars of the wonderfully strange connections between speculative fiction and utopian socialism.⁸ Examining the writings of Charles Fourier, the nineteenth-century French utopian socialist whose ideas shaped

such American communal experiments as Brook Farm, Brown calls attention to suppressed notebooks in which Fourier imagined that effects of successful communal living on the human species would be positively science fictional, resulting in our species growing amphibious, living for centuries, and regaining a prehensile tail tipped with an additional hand. Conservatives are not alone in imagining that the transformed social arrangements they bring about may hold consequences in the natural order. But the fervent denial by many conservatives of the human contribution to climate change and other ecological disasters is a symptom of their inability to apprehend its chiasmus: a transformed natural order must bring about consequences in social arrangements. The dogmatic “human ecology” propounded, for instance, by Pope Benedict XVI, yokes environmentalism to a reinscription of the nuclear family and traditional gender roles (Morton, “Queer Ecology” 273). The failure of the counterculture (Heavenly Breakfast barely lasted half a year) can then be held up by them as proof that it violated human nature.

Liberals and progressives, for their part, wield their own version of the reality principle against fantastic flights of fantasy, pointing for instance to the inability of the counterculture to address cogently the issues that black power, feminism, and gay liberation put on the national agenda. This attitude also hesitates skeptically before the ambient, Aeolian “we” encountering itself in the garden. In retrospect, it points out, such premature universalism simply ignored structural differences. Morton’s sympathetic critical analysis of ecomimesis similarly points out the impossibility of sustaining the illusion of direct experiential contact. Experience, he notes, is always constructed retroactively, that is to say, historically, a position also taken in recent affect theory, for instance in Lauren Berlant’s claim that “the aesthetic or formal rendition of affective experience provides evidence of historical processes” (16). As Morton has it, “The moment of contact is always in the past. In this sense we never actually have it or inhabit it. We posit it afterward. An echo can only reach our ears after the sound has caused the medium to vibrate” (*Ecology* 76). I will return to the echo.

Delany’s memoirs share Morton’s skepticism toward substantialist conceptions of nature and the correlative illusion of direct contact with it unmediated by language or memory. In such conceptions, nature exists in the specific—in rocks, monsoons, water hyacinth, and so on—and nowhere else. Alongside but against such substantialist conceptions of nature are “essentialist” conceptions that see nature as something that cannot be directly represented, and which instead tend toward the apophatic and negative utterance.

Contrary to the denigration of essentialism in most queer theory, Morton has at least one kind word to say for it: "Substantialist images of a palpable, distinct 'nature' embodied in at least one actually existing phenomenon (a particular species, a particular figure) generate authoritarian forms of collective organization," he argues, while "Essentialist ideas of a nature that cannot be rendered as an image have supported more egalitarian forms" (17). Homophobia and racism rely on a substantialist conception of nature to prop up heterosexuality as the palpable and distinct natural sexuality of the species, in which "opposite" sexes demonstrate normal attraction to the "same" race, reproducing a providential order. Liberal pluralism may extend the "charmed circle" of what counts as natural, as Gayle Rubin has argued, such as tolerating sex across the color line or certain forms of same sexuality, without discarding the fundamentally substantialist faith that certain acts can stand in for good and natural sexuality, while others must be scapegoated as beyond the pale.⁹ The challenge is not to discard representations of the environment, ecology, or nature, but to queer them by embracing the "cognitive or critical" resources of a rhetoric that sets nature and culture into chiasmic figuration (Edelman 19). Essentialist injunctions against a fully persuasive or substantialized rendering of the natural need not preclude a queering of ecomimesis, as Delany's work powerfully illustrates.

2

Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration.

Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature*

The heterotopic spaces Delany constructs within his writings, as I have already suggested, resonate to sounds that cannot always be straightforwardly understood as belonging to our aesthetic continuum. At their speculative limits, they do not refer to substantialist images of either real musical artifacts or a natural environment of sound. In this sense, the relationship between "source" and "vision" should be chiasmically reversed: it is not real communal life that is a source for Delany's speculative visions, but Delany's speculative visions that are a source for his rendering of communal life. They enable him to take Nature off the pedestal, set the

inside–outside, self–other distinctions into chiasmic interplay, and develop a poetics of memory that creatively distorts it “for essentially musical reasons” (Delany 2).

Heavenly Breakfast attempts to convey a sense of life in a “Lower East Side” commune organized around music-making without succumbing to moralism, even as he makes no effort to deny the commune’s ultimate failures to survive or record its music. Through a mode of urban picaresque, he disarms preconceptions in order to convey something of the everyday experience of the commune, retrospectively considered. In contrast to his prolix style elsewhere, here Delany sketches in only so much detail as to index a way of life, dropping clues without ever investing in rich description, fully developed characters, or a rich interiority for the first-person narrator. He describes showing the almost-complete manuscript to former members of the commune two years after it had disbanded, saying that one of them told him “you’ve left out an awful lot about yourself” (106). This ostensibly passive, “I am a camera” style of autobiographical narration conveys the sense of life as a sequence of images passing before the eyes like scenes in a movie. As the comparison of a book to a film implies, such foregrounding of mediality conveys an ambient sound of no discernible origin—evoking an immediacy of experience itself prized by the counterculture—and re-marks that rendering, establishing “difference out of an undifferentiated ground” (Morton, *Ecology* 49).

In an early, comic scene—the scene mentioned previously that he introduces by way of interruptive memory—Delany sets Nature upon a pedestal only to camp the very idea. The pedestal here is the porcelain throne, and the nature in question is one commune-dweller’s very public inability to urinate due to complications from a gonorrhea infection. The entire commune had come down with the venereal disease, and had collectively gone for treatment. Now they collectively held Snipper’s hand as he struggled through a urethral blockage, and took him back to the hospital when handholding proved insufficient. Delany risks a moral in this story when he mentions a hospital intern recalling another patient with a similar condition who was too ashamed to come to the clinic until its advanced state became fatal. But this memory interrupts less because it asserts the superiority of frank and realistic attitudes toward the body than because it refuses the public–private, inside–outside distinctions that place bodies in the foreground and environments in the background. Placing natural functions on a mock pedestal brings that which is normally abjected back into ambient circulation.

While setting up this human ecology without a fetishized Nature, Delany remains committed to problematizing the relationship between experience and language. As he muses: "One person's fantasy is another's reality. The difference between fantasy and the real, however, is that the ethical and moral implications the fantasy has for the person who indulges in it are always ones brought to it from a prior reality. The ethical and moral implications for those who live through what might once have been for them a fantasy situation can come from the reality of the situation; and so may be very different" (22). At one level, this observation reinforces the conception of communal experience as the "source" of speculative or fantastic vision. An experience lived by one person becomes the object of other people's fantasies, people who bring to their understanding of it their own experiences rather than the one depicted. What feels natural or unnatural about a fantasy, according to this claim, has everything to do with one's relationship to its indulgence. At another level, however, Delany does not so much assert the prioritization of experience as he explores the "continuous variation" that the differential distribution of experience sets into play. Such an aesthetic and descriptive project does not refuse or relativize moral and ethical implications as much as it scores them, like a piece of music scores notes.

In the quotation, Delany offers us a protocol for reading his descriptions of antinormative life, protocols that come with both the familiar claims to the evidentiary value of experience and warnings against the facile transmission of that experience. Here, Delany partly evades the famous criticism of him leveled by Joan Scott in her landmark essay, "The Evidence of Experience."¹⁰ Reality is not appealed to in the usual substantialist sense. It is not a set of things and experiences perfectly transparent to language, but an environment that envelops the writer, demanding a queer ecomimesis. The evidence of reality is the precariousness with which one, in order to render it, inevitably exposes the process of rendering. This is not simply a paradox of language, but a political predicament for intentional community. The precariousness of everyday communal reality is frequently conveyed in the memoir when the members of the commune encounter a state or disciplinary apparatus, such as a hospital, a high school, the police, or the omnipresent Con Ed electric utility. In these contacts, their way of life frequently proves simply untranslatable into the shorthand of "real life." Under duress, another person's fantasy of their reality crowds out their own practical negotiations of that reality.

The evidence of experience is therefore not primarily to be understood as contributions to an ordered and legible archive, but as a technology of the self engaged in a continuous assay. In *The*

Care of the Self, Foucault characterizes ancient Greek and Roman practices of self-governance in the following way:

This relation is often conceived in terms of the juridical model of possession: one “belongs to himself,” one is “his own master”.... But apart from this rather political and juridical form, the relation to self is also defined as a concrete relationship enabling one to delight in oneself, as in a thing one both possesses and has before one’s eyes. . . . The individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to himself is, for himself, an object of pleasure. . . . This pleasure . . . is defined by the fact of not being caused by anything that is independent of ourselves and therefore escapes our control. (66–67)

Communal life in *Heavenly Breakfast* pursued this self-possession in a collective sense: economic and social autonomy from mainstream society, together with an internal testing and gaining access to the self through aesthetic self-fashioning. This latter aspect of the care of the self was particularly present in the musicking of the commune: through music, *Heavenly Breakfast* moved into ensemble, become a delight for its own eyes and ears.

Heavenly Breakfast is interested in tracking the feminist, antiracist, and proto-queer possibilities of sexual liberation and communal egalitarianism. Such possibilities, however, arise through ambient poetics rather than self-conscious identity politics.

To a degree, *Heavenly Breakfast* is interested in tracking the feminist, antiracist, and proto-queer possibilities of sexual liberation and communal egalitarianism. Such possibilities, however, arise through ambient poetics rather than self-conscious identity politics. Delany portrays *Heavenly Breakfast* as a place where rules are kept informal and pragmatic, the immediate consequence of any decision being allowed to spontaneously produce a self-adjusting social order. In this respect, the memoir provides an interesting contrast to Delany’s speculative fictions, which require extended passages of exegesis in order to introduce the reader to a social setting in which there are, say, three genders, or technologies available to change sex, skin color, or sexual orientation. Yet while such fictional heterotopias seem to have little to do with journalistic depictions of an actual, if temporary, community, Delany’s insistent layering of fantasy and reality enable a useful juxtaposition. In *Capitalist Realism* (2009), Mark Fisher remarks upon how it is now easier to imagine the destruction of the world than to picture the end of the capitalism (1–2). We can see his point about the postcommunist, neoliberal present prefigured in Delany’s wry investigations of how the modest experimentations in free love and women’s and children’s liberation in *Heavenly Breakfast* and other communes were treated as almost science fictional by outsiders. Instead of simply picturing fantastic

alternatives to the dystopian present, and to depict them in fiction, the point of speculative genres is equally to investigate the closures in representation that make it difficult to imagine actually existing or historical alternatives to that present.

We see such concerns at play in the character Judy, a highly intelligent, speed-addicted 16-year-old runaway from Queens, who adopts the Breakfast as her family of choice. The adults of the commune (none of whom are over 27) engage in what would today probably be called a strategy of harm reduction in response to Judy's matter-of-fact declaration that she plans "to get as high as possible and stay that way as long as possible. I want to have as little to do as I can with what's real" (65). Their reaction contrasts with that of Judy's mother, who physically and verbally assaults Judy whenever the girl risks a trip home and who tries to persuade the police to arrest her for running away. With rigorously disciplinary logic, Judy's mother seeks to evict her from her home for the crime of running away from it. When Delany mentions Judy to another writer with whom he shares a literary agent, the writer is at first intrigued but quickly "appalled": "I tried to explain that, granted her situation, I could think of no better place for her than the Breakfast. People liked her; she could talk with them; she had good food, a place to sleep; people would remind her to take her contraceptive pill in the morning; people would advise her to stay out of some of the more ridiculous dope situations she often contemplated—advice she usually took. In short, people there took as much care of her as she could accept" (83). Here, Delany contrasts his acquaintance's moralizing fantasy of Judy's situation with the ethical and moral judgments that arose for the commune out of an ongoing testing of themselves and of Judy against the limits of both the possible and the acceptable. The care of the communal self surfaces in Delany's account of the commune's pastoral supervision of Judy's diet, sleep, sexuality, and substance use. It is also, more subtly, referenced in his opening phrase "I tried to explain. . . ." Indeed, *Heavenly Breakfast* contains frequent scenes in which giving an account of oneself occurs in a potentially hazardous scenario, one in which the account-giver is both privileged and at risk.

Playing on this theme of privileged vulnerability, Delany presents a series of comic changes in chapter 29, which largely consists of an extended excerpt from his 1968 notebook. In the excerpt, he offers first one, and then another conventionally moralizing conclusion to Judy's story, before denouncing both as "aesthetically manipulated lies" (93). Such a denunciation of aesthetic manipulation must, of course, be set in the context of his opening promise to "distort" for "musical reasons" (2).

The apparent contradiction sets up the different narrative outcomes as continuous variations upon the notion of a singular telos. In the first ending, Judy is found dead in a hallway somewhere on Ninth Street; in the second, she is encountered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, clean and sober and taking art classes at the Brooklyn Museum. “These,” Delany writes in his notebook, “are fictional endings for stories George Nisbaum [his appalled colleague] would write and Sal Orlac [his publisher] would publish, both thinking themselves highly moral men” (92). Delany urges his reader to avoid the temptations of such narrative closure and to recognize them as lies even “when they occur, as they do, in life” (93).

It would be useful here to employ Morton’s comparison between the “sadistic admiration” of femininity under patriarchy and similar idealizations of nature (*Ecology* 5). The “moral” conclusion to Judy’s story is the patriarchal one, which responds to her violation of correct behavior for girls by either punishing her or redeeming her. Delany insists that such a moralistic conclusion to her tale of excess, even if it actually occurred, would be a “lie,” pointing us to the critical act of negation her example provides in the text. This space-clearing is an ecological gesture insofar as it is a deterritorializing one, an ambient evocation of an environment without the prop of a substantialist image to hold its fictional coherence together. This becomes clearer when we see how Delany subjects even his own conclusion to radical, apophatic skepticism when he offers, from memory and ostensibly verbatim, Judy’s own reaction to both the fictional conclusions to her story and his own anticonclusion. Judy, Delany recollects, ponders the passage before concluding “You haven’t got it. . . . But you’re getting there. . . . I have to keep trying to say it. . . . [in] my own way. . . . And you have to keep trying to say it in yours” (93). Here again, we have the memoiristic essay as trial, attempting something we can’t get at in language but are nonetheless trying.

3

The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a word nymph.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

How do we make sense of Delany's claim that his distortions, such as the variations of Judy's narrative, are "essentially musical"? Music is more than a metaphor, but it also cannot be taken straightforwardly. About the music made by the Heavenly Breakfast, it seems, Delany says relatively little. Yet the core members of the commune have gathered precisely in order to rehearse and compose and perform; their musicking is daily, durational, participatory, and loud. There are some descriptions of the instrumentation of the band, its vocal arrangements, its rehearsal style, and the shifting ensemble of its participants and auditors. There are even some lyrical excerpts. But not much else. Musicking, with one crucial exception, recedes into the background of the quotidian existence of the Breakfast. Indeed, this very effect of receding seems to be a deliberate textual strategy: it calls attention to music through its very non-representation in text; it amplifies the silence of every page by calling attention to it.

An internal reason suggests itself for this strategic apophysis: the ultimate dissolution of the group in the face of an abrupt shift in the economics of the recording industry. Here, *Heavenly Breakfast* resembles other peripatetic texts such as Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929), in which, as quotidian life seems to move forward non-linearly, larger social and political forces are gathering in the background, forces that ultimately arrange themselves to make that life an impossibility. This is one powerful narrative irony in ambient poetics: the background we think we are perceiving throughout—the background of everyday life—is revealed at the conclusion to have another background—that of the structures of capitalism and governmentality. Periodically throughout the memoir, Delany hints that the band is rehearsing for an ultimate shot at recording. As a *deus ex machina*, just as the band finally secures a recording session at a small studio, Con Ed abruptly changes its credit policies, forcing the overnight closing of the studio and most of its equivalents. Ensemblic and improvisatory the music of the Breakfast may have been, but it was not, it turns out, at all oriented toward live performance on the concert stage. When faced with the need to go do "the whole theatrical thing" by touring and building a fan base of support to justify a conventional record deal, they instead choose to disband, leaving only the more ambitious members to pursue musical careers (111).

Heavenly Breakfast is thus a memoir of a band that left no recorded documentation (beyond the lyrics and sheet music still in the possession of Delany and possibly other surviving members). The essay is therefore not a literary mimesis of a particular band's musical style, but its elusive echo. That echo appears, literally and figuratively, in the major scene of musicking in the memoir, with which I close this essay.

This extended scene of Aeolian and timbral music writing takes place across several sequential chapters, forming a central episode in an otherwise center-less memoir. It begins with the commune piling into a van for a trip to an upstate monastery. At the monastery, it turns out that one of their number, whom they call Coca-Cola, was formerly known as Brother Francis, and is greeted as such by his former brotherhood. The juxtaposition of two modalities of alternative community-making is played for its anachronistic ironies, as the cowed monks gently laugh at the hippies' long hair, but permit them to drive up to the falls on their bucolic property and, as it were, get themselves back to some semblance of the garden. The golden children of Heavenly Breakfast spend the remainder of the day and into the evening playing music steadily.

Eventually, Lee, the flute player, wanders away toward the falls, then returns to retrieve Delany:

"Hey." Lee came up behind me. "I want to show you something."

I followed her back into the woods, where I climbed behind her to the second tier of the falls, so close to the water, the spray wet our shoulders. Climbing, she jerked her flute awkwardly beside her till, suddenly, from the top of the silver wand, gold spilled down it, snagging keys.

I looked up behind me.

The sun, up here, was still up, in salmon cloud, its own height from the horizon.

"Now, listen," Lee said, backing under a branch that brushed leaves over her hair. She blew a clutch of notes, faltered.

A sharp echo tumbled them back to us a whole second and a half after the flute her lips.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Let me see if I can get this right. I made it work before. . . ." She raised her chin and her flute.

. . .

I wrote a round," she explained. "It's only a three note delay. But I have to get the time perfect." She pulled in her chin, rolled the mouth plate on her lower lip.

The notes shot across the water's hiss. When they returned, a second and a half later, she'd move a third away.

Lee, and her echo, played. (53–54)

Why is this scene given such significance in both the scene at the monastery and the memoir as a whole? One reason is that it provides a musical counterpoint to the process of self-testing, self-governance, and self-pleasuring that Foucault identified with the care of the self, and Delany identified with both intentional community and its literary reckoning. As the rest of the commune travel up the hill and join Lee's audience, they listen to a mode of music and meaning-making that is central to the concerns of *Heavenly Breakfast*, one that necessarily evades direct transcription not only, or even primarily, because it is ephemeral performance, but because it is attached to a "a concrete relationship enabling one to delight in oneself, as in a thing one both possesses and has before one's eyes." Delany presents himself and the other band members as attracted to the scene of Lee's playing in a way that repeats his own attraction to the scene of Judy's art of living, a way that also echoes his attempt at writing "basically for myself" (11).

The echo resounding between music and its natural backdrop, as Thoreau suggests, is not a relationship of original and copy. Rather, musical ecology emerges without a nature "out there" but through rhythmic interplay. Musical mimesis and ecological mimesis encounter each other through a repetition in which each exists only in the interstices of the other. Neither is captured in substantial representation; rather it is a positive absence that is registered. As referenced earlier, Deleuze draws a distinction between the territorializing power of the refrain and the deterritorializing powers of music. He deliberately contrasts the refrain and music, although clearly the refrain—such as Lee's round—is also musical in the literal sense. He is not attempting to distinguish between good and bad music, true art and artless ecomimesis, but to contrast the way music can tie us to a territory, by producing an acoustic illusion of holistic immersion in an environment, or deterritorialize the subject, setting it up for an encounter with otherness.

The flute, and the echo, of course, evoke a series of traditionally gendered symbols. The scenario Delany presents is seemingly contiguous with the golden naïveté of Joni Mitchell's *Woodstock* (which conceivably took place not far in time or space from this other scene of rural musicking). It is telling, then, that Delany appends to this scene a supplementary detail that, like a snake in

the garden, uncoils to snap its venom at any complacent enjoyment of its ambient poetics.

As the other caravaners travel up to listen to Lee's round, another theme that mostly lies backgrounded in the text is suddenly remarked upon. It is relevant that it should be music that occasions this outbreak of racial anxiety. A relatively new addition to the group, an African-American man named Gerry, responds to Lee's round by saying "Wow! Oh wow! Wow!" and trying "to bop to the music and snap his fingers." "It wasn't really finger-popping music," Delany notes, "but he kept on till Riley, behind him said: 'Nigger, will you shut up!' So he did. It almost blew Lee's cool anyway" (54).

If this racial epithet appears to be an unusual detail on which to hinge a reading of *queer* ecology in *Heavenly Breakfast*, it may appear less so in the wider context of the Delany oeuvre. For the perverse brilliance of Delany's style is to draw attention repeatedly to the interdependence of the scenic and obscene, the inside and the outside, and the mechanics of circulation between them that are ordinarily kept hidden. We saw this earlier in the comic placing of nature on the pedestal of the toilet. Here, he reveals another dimension to our "sadistic admiration" of nature: our substantialist inability to tolerate another's enjoyment of it when it differs from ours. It is the differential between Riley and Gerry's enjoyment of ecomimetic music that "race" appears as a remark, not as a real property of certain kinds of music (race music), but as a toxic reflex that responds to the illusion of an outside by expelling the other from that scene. What's queer about this move is the manner in which it shows how the Aeolian desire to merge self and other, subject and object, human and nature, can never be mistaken for a utopian "outside" to the system it criticizes, but is forever being folded back into it. Queerness acknowledges the necessity of a stranger intimacy that precludes a territorialized nature such as Riley seeks violently to reinforce, and seeks instead to produce the music of a deterritorialized alternative.

There is thus a formal, as well as political, function to this scene of white feminine "nature music" being disrupted by a black masculine urban "finger-popping" rhythm. Gerry's spurned attempt to insinuate black rhythm into the bucolic scene of musical communing with nature certainly invites allegorical reading, insofar as it seems overdetermined by the white male Riley's inability to accommodate a musical miscegenation between jazz/jive body rhythms and ethereal flute-playing. Such an allegorical-cum-political reading, however, should not ignore the elaborate diagram of gazes set up in this scene: the group watching Lee; Riley watching Gerry watching Lee; Lee watching

herself being watched by Riley and Gerry, and “almost” coming to Gerry’s defense; and, of course, the “camera” at the scene: the black male and queer Delany watching and impassively recording it all.

In one sense, race and gender work as quintessentially social categories that fold the pursuit of the natural back into the cultural, the outside back into the outside. But the point of this passage can hardly be to indict Riley (who is, in fact, not indicted). In another sense, then, the re-marking of race brings together two exteriors: race’s exteriority to ecomimesis and ecology’s exteriority to a musicking it can relate to only through the echo. Foucault discusses such an encounter in his essay “The Thought of the Outside,” another essay that is not about the environment or nature, but can be productively reread in relation to contemporary ecological concern: “The outside cannot offer itself as a positive presence—as something inwardly illuminated by the certainty of its own existence—but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible, receding into the sign it makes to draw one toward it, as though it were possible to reach it” (154–55). In Foucault’s baroque figure, we can hear an echo of the little round that Lee performs within a text that cannot restore the music of the golden afternoon to its full amplitude but nevertheless continues, with each reading, to draw us toward the possibility of that audition. Nature, *Heavenly Breakfast* suggests, is the scene of the strangest of intimacies.

Notes

1. See *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010), eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson.

2. The final line, “We’ve got back to some semblance of a garden,” was not sung when Mitchell debuted the song in 1969’s Big Sur Folk Festival, and also is not sung on the original studio recording of “Woodstock” on *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970). But the line appears on the 1974 live album *Miles of Aisles* and in published lyrics. It is intriguing that this line, with its subtle qualification of the refrain’s grandiosity, replaces the very raw and possibly emotionally draining wordless singing of earlier performances. Mitchell is well known to dislike the expectation that she reperform her hits repeatedly, and the introduction of “semblance” could itself index her detachment from her audience’s desire to encounter Woodstock again and again in its pristine state.

3. Another is Jeffrey Tucker, whose monograph points to the various ways race is evaded in many readings of Delany. See his *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity and Difference* (2004).

4. Here I differ with Washington, who seeks to ground musical reference in Delany in the African-American genres of jazz, blues, the ring shout, and catching the spirit (Washington 250–51). These worldly resonances, while there, do not provide an interpretive key to the otherworldly scenario, but are precisely what needs to be interpreted (along with seeming correspondences of gender, sexuality, and color).
5. For an image of this cover, see the Wikipedia page, 17 Sept. 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heavenly_Breakfast>.
6. I allude here to one of the English translations of Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (1873–1876) rendered by Anthony Ludovicias as "Thoughts out of Season."
7. See David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), 54–59.
8. See Jayna Brown, "Delany's Heterotopian Possibilities," Delany at 70 Symposium, University of Maryland, College Park, 20 Apr. 2012.
9. See Gayle Rubin, *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (2011), 151–54.
10. See Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17.2 (Summer 1991): 773–97.

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