



Minimalism as Detoxification

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Minimalism has never been miniature. Although many of the formative works of sculpture collected in the spring 1966 exhibit of “Primary Structures” at the Jewish Museum in New York City that introduced the American public to minimalist art—including that of forerunners Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris—were scaled to the size of the human body, they demanded the entire space of gallery rooms. By 1970, Richard Serra had begun to experiment with large, single-material forms that exceeded human scale, including the zigzag of *Shift* (1973), whose six concrete slabs ranged in length from 90 to 240 feet; and then, more famously, the long sheets of steel that would comprise such works as the 120-foot long *Tilted Arc* (1981). When La Monte Young, often considered “the first true musical minimalist” (Potter 21), was inducted into the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest piano solo, he complained the book recognized “only” (Young and Zazeela) a four-hour performance, ignoring another “five-hour performance,” not to mention a later one that lasted “six hours and 25 minutes.” Other musicians of the first generation of minimalism—including Terry Riley in his *In C* (1964) and Steve Reich, first in his repetitively looping tapes of electronic recordings and then, most influentially, in his ensemble piece *Music for 18 Musicians* (1976)—may have reduced the number of pitches in a piece but repeated them at great lengths to fill the maximum amount of time. Philip Glass says he originally planned for his 1976

opera *Einstein on the Beach*, a pinnacle of minimalist repetition, to be a mere four hours, but “as it turned out, we ran over by about forty minutes” (30). And although literary minimalism has often been paired with the short story, as in the paradigmatic example of Raymond Carver (although most other minimalists, including Mary Robison and Frederick Barthelme, would become well-known for their novels), critics often overstate its reduced economy. As I demonstrate in this essay, these works, while allergic to long words, tend to stuff in many more smaller words than are semantically necessary.

No procedure of minimization quite isolates what seems distinctive about the various forms that have been called minimalist in the past fifty years. Ernest Hemingway wrote simple sentences in the first half of the century; what’s unique about those of Carver, Robison, and Barthelme in the second? Le Corbusier and the Purists had already greatly simplified form and minimized detail in the visual arts of the early 1920s with a manifesto that included a rule that Donald Judd, at least, would recognize as one of his own: “Art consists in the conception before anything else” (qtd. in Ball 36). Long histories of music, for its part, venture as far back as Richard Wagner’s “Prelude” to *Das Rheingold*, whose “opening E-flat chord ostensibly challenges Young in duration” (Strickland 124).

In this essay, I develop a theory of minimalism that accounts for why a large percentage of mostly American artworks created in the second half of the twentieth century intuitively seem to go together, while still distinguishing themselves from previous works in their respective media histories. This theory explains why the 1960s-1970s music of La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass; the 1960s sculpture of Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Richard Serra; and the 1970s-1990s prose of Raymond Carver and Mary Robison are similar, while being different from, for instance, John Cage, Le Corbusier, and Ernest Hemingway. These artists, writers, and composers participate in a common practice that responds to shared anxieties historically specific to the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the United States. My aim is to describe this practice in order to supply a principle that grounds these works in a common practice rather than draw from the biographies of individual artists or the histories of specific forms. I refer to this practice as detoxification.

As I elaborate below, it is not a coincidence that minimalism emerged to prominence in the United States in the same decade that accelerated the American environmental movement. This amplifies what Lawrence Buell has called its attendant “toxic discourse” (639),

the sense that humanity is embedded in a pervasively polluted environment of its own making. For Buell, contemporary toxic discourse “effectively starts with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*,” published in 1962 (645). Carson begins her work with a hypothetical “town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings” (9), a formulation repeated in more general terms in the first sentence of the next chapter: “The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings” (13). In doing so, Carson recasts an antagonism of man versus nature as an ecological crisis in which man kills himself with nature as a medium. The chemicals released into the world to poison insects settle into soil and water to be ingested by and “now stored in the bodies of the vast majority of human beings. They occur in the mother’s milk, and probably in the tissues of the unborn child” (21). But these toxins are largely “unseen and invisible” (43). Although toxicity-originating events may be spectacular (such as a nuclear explosion), the longer-term toxic environment is harder to image (such as the landscapes poisoned by fallout), in part because of what Jennifer Peeples has called “toxins’ tendency toward banality (they don’t *look* dangerous) and their frequent invisibility” (195).

Minimalism responds to this affective common sense of omnipresent but invisible toxic threat, what Carson called “the pollution of the total environment of mankind” (41). And just as Carson’s instinct in *Silent Spring* was to turn to scenes of tranquil domesticity or heteroreproduction to locate toxic threat—the tranquil town, the mother’s milk, the unborn child—so, too, does minimalism register toxicity as a danger not only to material bodies but also, and perhaps primarily, to intimacy. Acts of detoxification not only aim to de-escalate environmental danger but also to produce safe, hermetic spaces of intimacy: particular sites for relational flourishing carved out from the universal condition of toxic threat. In her classic cultural study of pollution, *Purity and Danger*—which, published in 1966, is also contemporary with the birth of high minimalism in art—Mary Douglas made this primarily positive function of detoxification clear: it produces order through the destruction of toxins. Douglas writes, “In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea” (2). Toxicity—a kind of pollution like dirt, something that is out of place—is a “type of danger which is not likely to occur except where the lines of structure, cosmic or social, are clearly defined” (140). As I argue below, ecological discourse’s anxiety about transgressing a cosmic man/

nature structure—and minimalism’s efforts to realign this structure through a renewed effort to expunge the natural environment or to detoxify the body of its residues—also picked up contemporaneous social anxieties, especially newly perceived transgressions along racial, gendered, and sexual lines as historically privileged people and artists responded to the civil rights, feminist, and gay liberation movements. For the artists and writers we have come to identify as minimalist, what was toxic about the environment was not just pollution but also a racialized and sexualized threat. Rather than a commitment to the abstract principle of the so-called minimal, they share a practice of detoxification that reorients and creates space in which multiple kinds of perceived toxicity—material and social—are conflated and then, fantastically, eliminated.

In arguing for thinking of these works as participating in a common style, I rub against the grain of a larger discourse that has developed, independently within several artistic media, claiming that minimalism is not a style at all or that it lies beyond a style’s limit of intelligibility. This discourse has tended to assume a view of style as “signature” (Robinson 246)—the mark of an individual—and to the extent minimalism is de- or non-subjective (whether in the non-expressive iterations of minimalist music or in the factory-manufactured rather than handcrafted forms of minimalist sculpture), it is therefore style’s antithesis. Stylistics in this vein has tended to develop taxonomies that locate the specificity of the signature. Exemplarily and influentially, Richard Wollheim distinguishes between “general” (183) and “individual” (184) style: whereas the former picks out features of a work that submit it to classification greater than any person or work, the latter picks out those elements that are primarily psychological, expressing an individual artist’s interests and motives. Even Roland Barthes calls style “a self-sufficient language” (10) that “has its roots only in the depths of the author’s personal and secret mythology.” But perhaps the most influential theorist in this vein is Arthur Danto, who calls style a “basic action” (201): the immediate, as if instinctive or reflexive, expression of an artist, whose immediacy also ensures that it leaves its mark on an artist’s object without her intention.¹ Although a philosopher of action in addition to an aesthete, Danto did not have the benefit of more recent action theory when he made this formulation, especially that in the genealogy that begins with G. E. M. Anscombe’s *Intention* (1957). Most recently, Will Small has redefined a basic action, not as a negative absence of mediating intention but through its positive expression of an underlying skill: the actions you can “just do” (*Two Kinds of Practical Knowledge* 7)

without planning them are the ones you've mastered through lots of practice. A basic action may look spontaneous and without intention when isolated, but the skill that makes this spontaneity possible—the skill that a basic action manifests or expresses—provides a continual fund of intention that the action embodies. What Small then usefully illuminates through the “life cycle of a skill”—its acquisition through doing, its maintenance through practicing, and its expansion through teaching—is a skill's social generality (“The Transmission of Skill” 103). In turn, it will not do to refer style, as an aesthetic kind of basic action, to individual immediacy, as Danto and other individualist theorists of style do; Small would ask us to loosen the monogamous intimacy between artist and style in order to see a larger and more social life cycle through which a skill has travelled.

The larger ambition of this essay is to understand not just the style of minimalism, but style generally, as a kind of action in this vein. At least since Nelson Goodman first presented “The Status of Style” as a lecture in 1974, stylistic analysis has had to give up the easy distinction between what and how, which it formerly relied on: Goodman writes, “What is said, how it is said, what is expressed, and how it is expressed are all intimately interrelated and involved in style” (803). In thus cutting across form and content, Goodman suggests that style should neither be identified with one pole of any dichotomy nor even be seen as some external, autonomous third term. Rather, it should be understood as mediating between them, coordinating content and form by picking out elements in each. In prose fiction, for instance, style coordinates different forms of words, sentences, and chapters with different themes and subjects. But if style always coordinates, I claim we should identify styles according to the action of coordination itself. I thus shift the terrain: content is what is said and style is what is done. What the coordination of form and content does in the works I survey here is detoxification: a steady draining from sentences of environmental cues, aiming for a simplicity associated with domesticity and space for the flourishing of white heterosexual intimacy.

Others before me have pointed to a relation between style and action. For example, Berel Lang suggests that we think of style less through an adverbial model (how a work of art is presented) and more through a “verbial” model (the presentation itself) (723), Jenefer Robinson argues that style is “a way of *doing* certain things” (227), and Stephanie Ross claims that “style inheres not in the finished object . . . but in the artistic *acts* that created [it]” (237). What I mean by action, however, is both more abstract and more

specific than these accounts: like Ross, I link style to the production of a work, but I am interested in what a work of art shows us about the reflexes operating in an artist at the scene of production—how form and content were brought together in a certain way. Thus, the action of style is not just the action of production itself but instead socially circulated strategies within the production process. This is how thinking of style as an action revises views of style as a “signature” (Robinson 246). For if styles are actions—specific ways of bringing together form and content—then actions can help identify styles, moving beyond a critical practice that refers styles to people or to the concentric circles of identity in which they are lodged. How exactly to define style has been the underlying problem animating work in the field of stylistics for over half a century; style’s slipperiness—the difficulty of reducing it to any one thing or of locating it in any one place—has made it a vehicle for carrying any number of political, social, and psychological dynamics. Is style the “signature” of an individual (like Austen, Warhol, or Hemingway)? Is it the effect of a school or some other name for a collection of like-minded individuals (like Pop, Minimalism, or the San Francisco Renaissance)? Or is it the name of a concept loosely linked to a period of time (like rococo or postmodernism and its substitutes)? Reconceiving of style as action cuts across these levels of analysis, pointing instead to social categories of shared action. When we are in the presence of a style—therefore an action produced by a social circulation of practice—we are invited to ask just what social circulation is at play and who is participating in it. Lots of people can perform the same kind of action, even though they may do it in different places and at different times and with different means.

In this essay, I focus on minimalist fiction as a case study for what kind of leverage thinking of style as an action—more specifically, as detoxification—gets us in tracking the social patterning of a shared practice. In particular, I show how foregrounding action can resolve difficulties in accounts of style that foreground affect, as in Mark McGurl’s argument that minimalism is best understood as a response to the shame experienced by working-class people as they enter the perceived elite institution of the university in the postwar period. I begin in the following section by first thickening my account of detoxification through a reading of an important Raymond Carver story, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” There, I lay out part of what I see as the formula of detoxification: sentences that simultaneously evacuate environments and imbibe detoxicants in order to orient space to hermetic intimacies. I then elaborate my reading of Carver

through readings of novels by other authors of the 1980s who have been called minimalist, especially Mary Robison, to claim that this detoxification is also about racial purification. In the final section of this essay, I reflect on how detoxification reframes our understanding of minimalism in other media, but especially the music and sculpture of the 1960s in which the term “minimalism” was first developed.

Cleansing Rituals: On Literary Repetition

“Will you please be quiet, please?” seems to be a favorite phrase of Raymond Carver: he gave it to the title of the short story in which it first appeared, often seen as a foundational text of minimalism, and again to the title of the 1975 book in which the story was first compiled, Carver’s first major-press collection of fiction. The heart of the sentence, “quiet,” is often described as minimalism’s aim, but what is curious is the doubling of “please” on either side, an addition of phatic noise that is quiet’s obverse. In “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” the concentration of little words not only flanks quietude but also pushes out unwanted knowledge: this is a story about Ralph’s coming to know that his wife, Marian, had drunken sex with another man “three or four years ago” (230). As Ralph confronts Marian about the incident, “know” becomes one of these short, repeated words that dances around unarticulated content: “he knew there was more and knew he had always known” (233). Like “please” in the title sentence, “know” and its conjugates—“knew” and “known”—overtake this sentence without ever signifying its object. The language compounds as if the condition of the world that is known can be changed if only it can be stalled by the fact of knowing itself.

But after Ralph learns that Marian has had sex with another man and he has gone out of their house in search of drink and then cards, it is not just this knowledge that the proliferation of little words in Carver’s style protects against. On his way home, he is confronted by “a small Negro in a leather jacket” (245) who “stepped out in front of him and said, ‘Just a minute there, man.’ Ralph tried to move around. The man said, ‘Christ, baby, that’s my feet you’re steppin on!’” The man then hits Ralph in the stomach, nose, and cheek, but the principal disturbance he brings to the narrative is idiomatic. These are the first words of their kind in the story, and some of the only words spoken since Marian’s confession; the only other dialogues have been a pleasant exchange in which a bartender asks Ralph what he wants to drink (“Should I draw one, Mr. Wyman?” [237]) and the banter around the table of cards, with men unmarked

by race whose favored expletive is consistently “for Christ’s sake” (243) instead of “Christ, baby” (245). Furthermore, unlike the man who hits Ralph—who, as we are reminded three times within only four sentences, is a “Negro” (245)—these other interlocutors would have said “those are my feet” and “stepping”: even when deliriously drunk, no one else in the story drops a “g.” Ralph’s encounter with violence in the story is also registered as violence to language: the story casts Ralph’s attacker as an attacker of Standard English, and linguistic difference exacerbates the distance between Ralph’s white domestic life and the streets to which, with the fantasy of that prior life threatened, Ralph has retreated.

This is the point brought home by the specter of Dr. Maxwell, an inspirational and beloved English professor whom Ralph remembers immediately before his confrontation with a “Negro.” The confrontation occurs on a pier, because as Ralph returns home after his night out, “he thought he’d like to see the water with the lights reflected on it” (245). On the pier, he tries to imagine how the professor—previously described as a “graceful man . . . with exquisite manners and with just the trace of the South in his voice” (226)—would act, concluding, “Dr. Maxwell would sit handsomely at the water’s edge” (245). Ralph is on his way to the water’s edge when the attack occurs. In this scene, Dr. Maxwell condenses multiple fantasies Ralph perceives to be under threat: as an English professor, a certain version of standardized language; as a Southern man, a set of behaviors that are culturally white elite but in supremacist fashion coded universally as good manners; and as the exemplar of seaside conduct, the aesthetic appreciation of nature. For Ralph, the aesthetics of nature seem to absorb the others—sitting at the water’s edge conflates the aspects of the white, classed gentlemanliness toward which Ralph aspires—and the attack is, more than an attack on his person, a disruption of his pursuit of this vision. Dr. Maxwell’s kind of masculinity seems uninhabitable here: it is both out of time and out of place, because the racial encounter bars Ralph from the seaside. Vanessa Hall has shown how Carver’s representation of nonwhite characters allows them to become a “repository” (90) for projected desire and abjection, in turn challenging while also facilitating by contrast protagonists’ efforts to “live up to culturally coded expectations of white manhood” (91). In this scene, the pier absorbs Ralph’s environmental anxieties, which come to organize the others.

Water registers as a similar conflation of threats in Carver’s “So Much Water So Close to Home,” first published in *Furious Seasons* (1977) and ultimately immortalized in the 1981 collection *What*

We Talk About When We Talk About Love. The story takes place in the mountains, where husbands have gone for an annual fishing trip in the summer “before visiting relatives can get in the way” (80). The trip is, in other words, a seasonal performance of freedom from domestic obligation. But it is also the performance of a different kind of domesticity: “So Much Water” opens with mother and wife Claire in her kitchen, cleaning the dishes. On the fishing trip, however, it is the men, including her husband, who “took their cooking things and eating things back down to the river and washed them” (81). The narration, which begins by propping up and repeating the fact of their maleness—“decent men, family men, men who take care of their jobs” (80–81)—now suggests the fishing trip provides them with an escape from their maleness or the normative masculinity they had previously inhabited. Just as G. P. Lainsbury has argued that “the values of domesticity and of the wilderness are fundamentally opposed to each other” throughout Carver’s writing (44), there is a queerness to these homosocial mountains in which the men perform the domestic responsibilities they had previously allotted to their wives.

Because the mountain is coded as other to their otherwise normative heterosexual lives, it is not a surprise that other perceived threats to domesticity and heterosexuality also begin to show up. On this particular trip, the looming threat is given corporeal figuration: in the river where they are to fish, before they set up camp, they find the body of a girl, dead and naked, “wedged into some branches that stuck out over the water” (81). The narrative’s persistence in referring to the body as a “girl,” therefore picking out her youth as well as her gender, echoes the “sons and daughters” the men had left behind to go on their trip. Abandonment of traditional masculine and fatherly roles blends with the death of this girl, whom we learn was killed by a man. The river becomes both the space in which these men take a break from fatherhood and in which other men leave their murdered intimates; the river is where heterosexual sex either is forfeited or goes violently wrong. One of the fathers—Claire wonders if it was her husband, Stuart—“took her by the fingers and pulled her into shore. He got some nylon cord and tied it to her wrist and then looped the rest around a tree.” The hybrid material of nylon—a synthetic material originally manufactured to replace natural silk—provides a route for metaphoric crossover between the body and the tree, or between the manmade production of violence and the natural figures that begin to provide an anchor for its consequences. As the story progresses, the natural scene—with the trees and the water—becomes contaminated with violence.

Indeed, in the fantasy logic of the story, it soon begins to seem it is not men who are responsible for domestic abandonment or domestic violence, but the river. “Why did you have to go miles away?” (83), Claire asks Stuart regarding the choice of their fishing location, when there are creeks and a large pond in their own town: “So much water so close to home.” Claire’s question suggests she is more concerned about the discovery of the violence in the river than about the violence itself; what is terrible to her is not that the girl was killed but that her husband had to bring the image and memory of the outdoors back “home.” Stuart’s mistake was his choice of water: the water out there is toxic because it is where dead girls show up, whereas the water closer to home is somehow safer.

That Claire is more concerned with Stuart’s choice in water than with the death of the girl is confirmed by the extent to which Claire seems to take for granted that women will often meet violence by men. Violence is not just the particular tragedy of the girl in the river, but generically endemic to the heterosexuality that Claire and Stuart inhabit, as suggested throughout the story by Stuart’s refrain of warnings—“I won’t have you passing judgment,” he says to Claire (80)—and the latent threat of violence that might manifest should these prohibitions not be met. “Don’t rile me” (83) is Stuart’s immediate response to Claire’s question about the choice of fishing location. He continues: “You’re going to get me riled”; “you’re getting me more riled by the minute” (84). This is a relationship where, to use the aquatic metaphor, the risk of some explosive outbreak seems to lie just beneath the surface. Claire, too, seems to have been trained to expect that a violent end to heterosexuality is not exotic but common. She recalls the murder of another girl during her youth who was also thrown into a river. The most recent river murder helps her imagine her own: “I look at the creek. I’m right in it, eyes open, face down, staring at the moss on the bottom, dead” (83). But when she tells Stuart about this genealogy of violence by men against women, a genealogy in which she cannot help but imagine herself one day to belong as just another instance, all he can tell her is not to get him riled. Violence is one of the prohibited topics, and so to talk about violence will only produce it.

Whereas Stuart’s solution to violence is a discursive ban, hoping that a prohibition on speaking will arrest the cycle of violence—never mind that to prohibit speech is itself, as Laurie Champion writes, a “manipulative strategy” or form of violence (243)—Claire’s solution becomes a ban on water: if only she could get rid of rivers, then she would have gotten rid of the places in which murdered girls show up

and therefore, perhaps, have prevented murder, hers included. For Claire, the task in turn becomes the creation of domestic spaces that, away from the violent waters of the great outdoors, can provide more tranquil modes of inhabiting heterosexuality. At home, their backyard comes to bear much of the work of producing a different domestic space because it is enclosed from the larger environment around it. The yard is outside the house but still belongs to it, or rather it is a portion of the outdoors that the presence of the house has tamed, enclosed, and repurposed. When Claire decides to attend the funeral of the girl her husband and his friends discovered, she leaves her child, Dean, unattended for the afternoon. She entrusts him to the yard with a note: "*Honey, Mommy has things to do this afternoon, but will be back later. You stay in or be in the backyard until one of us comes home*" (85). The word "backyard" then gives her pause: "Is it one word or two?" The stumble over the word suggests the space has become as much symbolic as actual for her and therefore difficult to reenter into language. At this moment in which she is leaving her home to confront the violence that has disturbed it, she dwells for an extra moment in thinking of the yard and the safety it fantastically affords.

Yet this fantasy is hard to sustain. When Claire returns home from the funeral, she finds Stuart drinking in their kitchen. Dean, we learn, is in the backyard playing, safely. But Claire is about to learn that the problem with having a safe space is that it has a space—a finite location—and you cannot be there all the time: Stuart comes at her menacingly, claiming a right to her body by telling her, "I think I know what you need," and proceeding to unbutton her jacket and blouse (87). Instead of resisting Stuart's advances, Claire responds by undoing the remainder of the buttons herself. In the last words of the story, she tells him, "Before Dean comes. Hurry" (88). Claire seems to consent to Stuart's advances as a means of warding off the violence she has feared he is capable of. That violence—not just in memory, having just come from the girl's funeral, but also viscerally and personally imminent violence—on Claire's mind is confirmed not only explicitly by her at first worrying "something's happened to Dean" (87), and not only metonymically by her realizing he is outside in the safe space where she is not, but also metaphorically and most tellingly by the appearance of "so much water" (88) drowning out whatever Stuart is saying. It is unclear what, precisely, this water is; because we are inside, we might expect it to be a faucet, but no faucet has been mentioned. In any case, the water—its violence—has come home. Claire has been unable to dry out the space of her domesticity permanently, and the environmental contagion of violence appears after all.

What “So Much Water” registers as a fantastic environmental threat to heterosexuality in its content, “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” seeks to repair in its style. Immediately after Ralph’s encounter with violence on the pier, he returns home and locks himself into a bathroom. At this point, the barrage of the word “please,” characteristic of the story’s style, reaches its peak, first as Marian asks to see him and inspect his wounds (“Ralph, let me in, please, darling. Ralph? Please let me in, darling. I want to see you. Ralph? Please!” [248]) and then as Ralph asks to be left alone in the words the title of the story has scripted for him. But the repetitions—especially of “darling,” “please,” and Ralph’s name—not only fill up rather than prepare quiet, they also are designed to support and sustain the domesticity of the scene, pushing out the memory of the outside world. It is therefore especially fitting Ralph speaks these words from the bathroom, in which he is trying to clean up: the twitch of pleasantries, and their compounding of politeness, seek to purify him of the dialect that has been directed at him, which he mistakes for violence itself, by attempting to restore a linguistic order in which he is not man, but “darling;” not a pejorative “baby,” but “Ralph.” Because piers have long organized spaces of men cruising for sex with men, and because a hint of homoeroticism remains sustained both by the man calling Ralph “baby” and by Ralph remembering when Dr. Maxwell would “sit handsomely” at the pier, Ralph may also be trying to erase not only racial otherness, but, as in the mountains in “So Much Water,” queerness. The two projects converge in Ralph’s attempt to create now a domesticity that shuts off the outside in order to reinforce its whiteness and heterosexuality. Within his locked bathroom, Ralph hopes to purify the water of what he perceives as a racial and queer contagion, soaking in water distilled from the sea he no longer trusts. His aim for linguistic order seeks to curate a domestic space detoxified from an aquatic environment in which human violence and racial otherness have been encoded.

Critics of Carver have tended to read Ralph, and by extension Carver, as “yearn[ing] for the refuge of an impregnable silence” (Saltzman 70). But it is not just quiet that Ralph—or the style referred to as minimalism—wants: technically, he has that on the pier after his attacker leaves. If it was only quiet he wants, Ralph could stay there; but, by quiet, Ralph really means a cleansing of noise and a purification of space. The seaside, which he has racialized, must be detoxified, and this requires not only a subtraction of words, but also the addition of ones that can induce the setting in which he wants to be: “please, darling” (248). In this particular story, the aim of style is

not quiet, but a certain kind of shutting up: style pushes out of the story the toxic noises of environmental danger, domestic violence, and racial threat that have shown up in the story's content.

Mel Chen has analyzed how American nationalist imagery particularizes and racializes the common condition of exposure to toxicity in order to reinforce a select elite's humanity. Using lead as his example of "displaced racialization," Chen notes that, in the early twenty-first century, Americans began to consider lead not as a domestic threat to black Americans but a xenophobic threat to white bodies under attack from a danger of Chinese origin ("Toxic Animacies" 269). This xenophobic threat was rendered in the figure of the innocent child. Products from China manufactured with traces of lead implicitly position China itself as a toxin, conflating the fear of the vulnerable child's infection with fear of a "vulnerable national body" when American sovereignty is perceived as unable to prevent the contamination of immigration ("Racialized Toxins" 372). Instead of recognizing laboring Chinese bodies as themselves threatened by lead, a recognition that might have provided common ground for solidarity across nation and class and against the conditions of capitalism more generally, American whiteness coopts the exclusive privilege of being under threat in order to reinforce its identity as singularly human and the only race with a right to a sovereignty of safeness. Toxicity facilitates this aggressive logic by which national sovereignty is assured by way of a monopoly over the discourse of vulnerability and complicates other understandings of sovereignty as a disavowal of interdependency or as an exception from the ontological rule of openness to outside threats; instead, potential or imagined injury becomes the site of articulating sovereignty by exempting everyone else from its frame.

What I have been calling detoxification—the attempted removal of a kind of risk that is primarily environmental—is, in this light, about the production of a certain kind of social space. The apparent universalism of toxicity is used as a resource to carve out decidedly nonuniversal spaces; toxicity becomes a background condition for picking out and selecting populations that can be separated, actually segregated, from one another. So, too, does "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" embody an aversion to blackness by linking it to violence and exposure to the natural world and then removing it all from the narrative at the same time. In this story, Ralph's speech patterns aim not for reticence but for purity.

By trying to reset domesticity through detoxification, Carver's story is of the same species as minimalist novels of the 1980s that

categorically stage a threat to conjugal heterosexuality. As Vanessa Hall has shown, Carver, who began his career in the 1960s, carries with him the racial anxieties of that pivotal civil rights decade, but many writers who began to publish in the decade of AIDS also figure the threat in queer bodies. The content of these novels has shifted, but the form of creating domesticity persists. Such novels produce intimate space through subtraction from a constellation of perceived and projected toxicities. Many canonical novels of the 1980s even stage the “homosexual panic” that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has identified as generic and omnipresent at the time (19). The protagonist of Ann Beattie’s *Chilly Scenes of Winter* enjoys a party “until he began to sense strange looks, until he figured out that Audrey thought he and Sam were queer” (47). In Frederick Barthelme’s first novel *Second Marriage*—a novel in which simply learning strangers are getting married can make people “feel a lot better” (10)—the protagonist’s step-daughter is worried about her mother looking “like a dyke” (13), to which the mother replies, “These young people today ... [she’s already] familiar with the concept of homosexuality—what do you make of that?” And the childless characters in Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country* keep having to explain why they do not fit into the standard heteronormative narrative for their age group: “Emmett, don’t you want to get married and have a family like other people? Don’t you want to do something with your life?” (225). Nonetheless, they insist, at least they are not gay: one character says, “he’s not gay either, so don’t think that” (170). Each of these works is anxious about administering familial roles, and they are anxious because their characters do not seem to have domestic spaces in which they could show up in the roles they ought to be inhabiting. Domestic space needs to be recreated in these works in order for reproductive heterosexuality to be distributed, and the persistence of homophobic panics shows how much this work must be continually repeated.

As in Carver, these novels often code the queer threat to domesticity as an environmental toxin. In Mason’s *In Country*, for instance, a Vietnam War veteran experiences remarkable adult acne whose etiology is suggested to be Agent Orange, the defoliant that was used by the United States military in its herbicidal warfare in the 1960s and that caused much more severe health effects in generations of Vietnamese citizens. In this novel, acne provides a physiological analog to the character’s diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, figuring how violence gets channeled through environmental toxicity in order to leave its marks continually on bodies that have returned home—where home, too, becomes disturbed as

a category. The synchronization of the problem of toxicity and the problem of domesticity is made explicit when the novel's protagonist later refers to childbirth as being "[not] much different than popping a pimple" (177): here, reproductive heterosexuality is coded as the elimination of a symptom of environmental toxicity brought by war, or reproduction occurs through a metaphoric detoxification of environmental damage.

Even when danger is not explicitly staged as environmental, the style of these works seeks relentlessly to expunge environmental otherness. That is what "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" powerfully brings out: how Ralph's project has become Carver's style. Kirk Nessel has pointed out the "insularity" (116) of many of Carver's characters, who "seal themselves off from their worlds, walling out the threatening forces in their lives even as they wall themselves in." In this story, however, it is not just Ralph who is trying to subtract his world of dialect; in the third-person narration of the story, it is also Carver's writing that has expunged dialect as a condition of the story even being told. So, too, might we remember that the earlier repetition of "know" and its conjugates did not belong to a free indirect discourse that comingled narrator and character voices but to the narrator entirely. Detoxification becomes the condition of narration in these stories: Carver must clean up language before characters can start to show up. Carver's characters, in the content of his story, show an allergy to natural environments coded as dangerous and racially threatening, but this allergy is also manifest in Carver's style, in its will to shut up environmental and racial noise in order for their stories to be told.

Certainly many writers who do not write detoxifying sentences are also obsessed with "toxic discourse" (Buell 639), as in the "airborne toxic event" (114) of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* or the meditations on intoxication (by alcohol, marijuana, and television) in David Foster Wallace's maximalist *Infinite Jest* (1996); and certainly many authors who write in this style, like Bret Easton Ellis, are less obsessed with representing toxicity. But what is special about detoxification as a style is its persistent use of figurative toxicity over and above its occasional representations of toxicity. For instance, what Frances Ferguson has identified as Ellis's profusion of brand names throughout his writing such that "the proper name has been capable of applying to both persons and products" (150) is another version of Carver's repetition of "please" that keeps a natural environment at bay by orienting language to manmade objects and the intimacies they monitor. Although Ursula Heise has argued that narrative content

has yet to catch up with the experience of the radical and globally dispersed interdependence overseen by risk and toxicity, minimalism registers a continued anxiety over precisely this dynamic, and it lives this anxiety by acting out detoxification in its style.²

The style of Ellis and Carver is also dramatically distinct from the writing of someone like Hemingway, who is often considered to have bequeathed to them their signature writing techniques. When Hemingway reflected on his style that “if you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened” (“The Art” 3), he immediately provided two examples: in his story “Big Two-Hearted River,” “the war, all mention of the war, anything about the war, is omitted,” even though it forms the background of the story; and in “A Sea Change,” “I left the story out.” In these stories that have lost their story, what remains are their titles, which evoke natural environments: a river, a sea. What emerges to tower over and absorb human narrative are such environments: we orient to the river, not the war; to the sea, not the broken marriage. Hemingway’s investment in natural environments is clearly evidenced not only here but also in the titles of his major works, almost all of which are populated by geographic or climatic figures: *The Torrents of Spring* (1928), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1936), *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), and *Islands in the Stream* (1970). Throughout Hemingway’s writing, human stories are offered up to the environment for safekeeping; it was no surprise when he famously turned to the environmental metaphor of the iceberg to describe his style.³ Hemingway’s style coordinates simple sentences with environmental imagery; it could be described as an action of conservation. Carver’s sentences may be similar, but his style is not. Martin Scofield has called Carver’s writing works of “negative pastoral” (248): pastoral because of its focus on the working classes in activities like fishing, analogous to the shepherds of a previous time, and negative because of its focus on “the mundane, the seemingly trivial” (250). Compared to Hemingway, however, we might instead call Carver antipastoral in his rejection, rather than redirection, of pastoral imagery. Indeed, an antipastoral bent could not have been otherwise for a writer who began his career the same decade that Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*. Carver’s antipastoralism symptomizes a sensorium in which environments are toxic to, rather than guarantors of, human intimacy.⁴

Other works of the 1980s adopt a protocol of cleansing similar to Carver’s—they detoxify an environment coded as black and other in order to produce a fantasy of safe intimacy—but also expand the

style's range of techniques. Although Carver has received the largest share of attention from scholars, David Leavitt once called Mary Robison "the originator of the so-called minimalist short story," and she developed many of its stylistic tendencies (118). Like Carver's "So Much Water So Close to Home," Robison's first novel *Oh!* synchronizes a threat of domestic violence with environmental danger. In *Oh!* set in the Midwest, this environmental danger, foreshadowed as an "emergency" (35), is a tornado, which causes a confrontation between Maureen and Chris. In a previous domestic fight, Chris broke Maureen's teeth. Maureen makes the connection between the different kinds of violence—Chris's and the tornado's—explicit: "here's Chris, everybody, dragging a tornado with him" (104). After their previous fight, and until this confrontation, Maureen lives with her widowed father and the child she shares with Chris, Violet. Her father's house is an unwieldy place that too often fails to secure the institutional boundaries that allow him to inhabit the role of father (he is dating a younger woman and, against Maureen's wishes, often brags of their sexual intercourse), allow Maureen to inhabit the role of both a daughter and mother (she frequently sleeps in beyond Violet's awakening), and allow Violet to inhabit the role of daughter (her occasional attempts to perform childhood fail, as for instance when she asks her mother and uncle to have a slumber party with her, and the adults instead watch Charlie Chan movies she finds unentertaining, leaving her to retreat to bed at a reasonable hour after all). In this disorienting kinship arrangement, *Oh!* might, optimistically, have been about how families take on more flexible forms in a contemporary period, severing behaviors from the determination of generational status. But the novel is ultimately anxious about the arrangement, and it seeks to reaffirm the boundaries that the family home is supposed to set up in order to administer roles to those who live within it. When Violet wanders from home, she is promptly returned by the police: "You stay in your nice house, little girl" (50). The police inform Maureen how to instruct her child: "You might tell her, Miss, that we've got some bad characters running loose." It does not seem to occur to the police that one of these bad characters might turn out to be Violet's father and that Maureen must keep him, and his threat of violence, outside in order to be a "nice house" at all. Rather, the police seem to believe that if people are in a house they will have the right roles to function as a family.

Ultimately, instead of dwelling within the space of disruption, *Oh!* redistributes the responsibilities of parenting to the house's black cook and maid, Lola, who persistently reminds Maureen and

her father what she thinks they ought to do and often does it herself when they do not. Instead of having its characters work out different forms of relationality within their inchoate domesticity, the novel installs Lola as a familial superego, overseeing and administering their home. That a person of color is taxed, by necessity of her economic precarity, with facilitating white heterosexual domesticity is one of the queasy components of the novel's racial politics, although we might say the novel is merely representing the reality of caregiving labor in America. The other queasy component, however, belongs to the novel's representation of people of East Asian descent, foreshadowed by the Charlie Chan marathons but in the end provided directly in the form of a doctor who attends to Violet after she has an allergic reaction to wasp stings. Here the doctor explains why Violet went into shock: "Has arrelgy of insect poison. . . . Arrelgy, okay?" (167). He then explains to Maureen how to administer an epinephrine pen to her "dotta" (168): "The poison of wasp build up, okay? Cumurative? . . . And so within immediately thirty minute is sting you give this? Prease? Her rungs corrapse if you don't okay?" Maureen keeps trying to standardize his speech—"She—has—an—allergy?" (167) and "My daughter" (168) and "Is cumulative?"—foregrounding their linguistic difference rather than the labor he is performing to keep her white family alive. Maureen's allergy to how he speaks English is, then, more complicated than Ralph's allergy to dialect in "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" Here, Maureen's disciplining of language, recasting each of the doctor's words in her own dialect, is also a way of erasing the labor that people of color have performed for her and her family. Both Lola and the doctor have provided a model for her functioning as the mother she in turn aspires to be, but she must disavow this reliance, claiming her knowledge and behavior to be original. Lacan would call this extimacy (*extimité*), an "intimate exteriority" (139) that folds interiority into its outside. In Jacques-Alain Miller's widely cited gloss, which rhymes well with the insecticide imaginary of *Oh!* "extimacy says that the intimate is Other—like a foreign body, a parasite" (76). What minimalist style projects as being its toxic outside—a violent environment coded as racially other—is also what is most intimate: domestic violence, for instance, is internal to the domesticity that fantasizes itself capable of subtracting from violence so long as it remains actively detoxifying. This exterior violence is always already interior. So, too, the racialized pedagogies of Lola and the doctor are, although officially projected as other, deeply internalized and appropriated. Race becomes a part of her domestic unconscious, but this means precisely that it must stay there, without a voice of its own.

The corollary of these extimate environments is that environmental danger also becomes, for Maureen and her family, a resource for the task of reinhabiting interior and disciplinary roles (here, the role of mother). On the one hand, this is a dynamic dramatized in the plot of the novel: in the cathexis of tornado and domestic violence, for instance, rebuilding a house after the tornado seems, fantastically, to solve the problem of domestic violence it has absorbed; the tornado becomes a resource for the family because it provides something to repair. The wasps, too, become an environmental threat that is instrumentalized by providing an external condition that domesticity, and especially the physical boundaries of a house, can protect against; they become a resource because they provide a need for boundary itself. In both of these narrative situations, the environment becomes something to be negated, and environmental negativity becomes domestic positivity: the act of getting tornados and wasps out of their space is how the family creates domestic space altogether. In other words, their domesticity becomes the project of so many environmental negations.

But, as in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” the dynamic of domesticity through detoxification, through the continual creation of a boundary and the designation of a threatening environment to be pushed out, is viscerally lived not only in the content but also in the style of *Oh!* especially in its minimalist habits. Although Robison is, rightfully, acknowledged for her canonical minimalism of the early eighties, it is important to observe that minimalist style is not a stable, constant presence in her work, but something that particular narrative conditions trigger. This, for instance, is how *Oh!* begins, in prose that embellishes rather than strips the experience of Maureen being woken from sleeping in a field behind her father’s house:

A thunderous noise shook the ground and jolted Maureen from her dream. She shoved herself up onto her elbows in grass clippings that whirled like gnat swarms, and looked into the skis of a helicopter bobbing, nose down, yards above her own nose. Noise pressed on the bulb of her skull. She rolled out of her sleeping bag, stood too fast for balance, flumped to her knees. Above her the machine swung like something on the end of a derrick. The man in the Plexiglas bubble wore a headset, had the lenses of his black glasses trained right on her. She scrambled for the patio. The helicopter dipped and chased her, the wash that shot from its blades beating against a rode of hedges. She went under the patio’s slatted roof. The helicopter, hovering, gave off a siren sound that never got going, pleading meant just for her. (5)

At first, the prose is rapid: both the trailing collection of dependent clauses to describe the skis of the helicopter and the asyndeton in naming the actions they induce in Maureen add a chaos to the writing that seems to identify with the helicopter's speed. The helicopter also blurs the setting—the peculiar simile that compares grass to gnats, using a natural image to describe another natural image, puts all of nature into one chaotic heap—and then the language piles up references to its manmade parts: machine, derrick, Plexiglas. But as the passage progresses, and as Maureen approaches the house, the sentences get shorter. Numerically, the second half of the passage's sentences take up only a third of its space, and so the writing slows down, punctuated, by a factor of more than half. This is the relief the patio provides: short, declarative sentences that protect against the discombobulation of an outside world. Under the patio's roof, the narration even stops identifying with the helicopter and instead identifies with Maureen: now, the helicopter's sounds are given meaning "just for her." Outside: long, compounding sentences and a general, threatening disorganization; inside: shorter sentences that render Maureen's consciousness. In this opening passage, Robison attains the effect of minimalism by getting rid of environmental references, producing a protective enclosure—the house—in which this novel of domesticity can be set.

Compare this opening scene with a later scene in which Lola and Maureen's brother are not coming into the house but leaving to buy Lola's cleaning supplies in town; the telos, metaphorically and literally, is a clean home. But on the way, they take a "shortcut down a graveled road" (20), leaving the paved paths that have civilized natural land and venturing into spaces that remind Maureen's brother of the landscapes his mother used to paint: "there were no people in them!" (21). At this point, in a land without people, the style begins to act in such a way to push out an apparent anxiety about being in nature such as this. First, this scene, one of the only ones in the novel that takes place outside, away from the family home, is rendered almost completely in dialogue full of exclamation marks indicating the screaming he and Lola must do to hear each other over the noisy gravel path. Human speech is trying to conquer the space, pushing out environmental sound in order to occupy the entirety of the narration. But it does not seem enough for the prose to render a bucolic drive almost entirely in dialogue that contrasts the setting. As if eager to bury the natural surroundings even more, the narration hyper-attributes speech: "Lola screamed . . . Lola screamed . . . Lola screamed . . . Lola screamed" (20–21). For only nineteen lines

of dialogue, the narration provides an astounding eleven speech tags. Functionally, these tags are unnecessary. This is a conversation between only two people and, because the narration almost never breaks to describe the landscape, we never lose track of who is talking. Furthermore, because almost all of the tags are identical (“screamed”), and the only tonal information they provide is already doubled in the exclamation marks, they do not add anything positive to the narration. Instead, their function is primarily negative, as another strategy of drowning out the environment, filling up more space with language that orients the world to human bodies instead of their settings. Like the repetition of “please” in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” the repetition of “screamed” in *Oh!* creates a space of human encounter that requires pushing out environmental cues—specifically the landscape—in order to sustain the encounter.

This hyper-attribution of speech is a consistent characteristic of the style of Robison’s later novels. In *Why Did I Ever*, where most of the conversation is dialogue between two easily identifiable people, almost every line still has a speech tag. Robison goes even further and frequently breaks up a single line of dialogue from a single person over two lines in order to provide further opportunities to tag:

“They’re replaying *The English Patient*,” says the Deaf Lady.
She says, “Which I have to confess I like.” (29)

The use of speech attribution to pace the speech itself, filling in its pauses with more language oriented toward it, keeps the space of the dialogue sealed off from whatever else could have come in to fill its gaps. The style constantly performs human activity and keeps itself moving by its own devices in order to keep everything else out.

Such a strategy takes on particular importance in Robison’s next novel, *One D.O.A., One on the Way*, in which she returns to *Oh!*’s trope of disaster narrative and domestic disruption, this time set in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The protagonist of *One D.O.A., One on the Way* is Eve, who is self-conscious of her biblical namesake (much to her chagrin, her husband’s name is Adam), but she finds she is not in paradise but a “post-traumatic” apocalypse (Tansley 61). Eve is a location scout, and the novel narrates her driving around looking for settings to film various television commercials or short films. Her job requires her to encounter the devastation of New Orleans in the wake of the hurricane, and much of the novel reads as a series of facts about the slowness with which the city is being rebuilt or not being rebuilt. But the real disaster zone, from her perspective, finally seems to be the family home of her husband,

although not because it suffered physical damage from the hurricane (it seems relatively unscathed). Rather, it is a space of complicated domestic dispute, passive aggressive animosity, and latent tension that threatens to erupt, and finally does, into violence (giving the novel its title). It is remarkable how much this book about a city in the aftermath of environmental disaster manages not to dwell too long on natural scenes. Dialogue persists to carry the story along without having to tap into background: it is as if, as long as its troubled characters can keep talking, and talking about each other to each other, the narration can avoid having to attend to the unspeakable trouble. Because the characters who populate the dialogue are economically privileged, relatively sealed off from the conditions of widespread depravity that preexisted but were exacerbated by the hurricane, they also push out the general population of survivors in New Orleans: the novel, set in a city with a majority black population, surprisingly fails to depict or name black bodies. Robison pushes blackness, along with natural disaster, into a background that can be obscured as long as folks in the foreground keep talking and the narrative style can continue to rehearse those acts of talking.

At one point in the novel, Eve explains to her husband the value of her job by describing the importance, to film, of the backgrounds she scouts: “If [a film] doesn’t involve special effects, or isn’t a musical, or action with cattle stampeding, but just shows conversations and walking around and the like, there must be something to entertain the eyes” (124). *One D.O.A., One on the Way* is a novel that “just shows conversations and walking around and the like,” but it is one, too, that retracts background, as if to tell its audience not to be entertained or distracted by it. It is a novel that has internalized the habits of detoxification, assuming a background structured by an unstable natural world and by a violent racial imaginary and then working, exhaustively, to keep it at bay, to keep it from appearing within the narration of a story in such a world.

Reframing Minimalism as Action

Many of the essays from the first wave of minimalist criticism—from those in Kim A. Herzinger’s special issue of the *Mississippi Review* in 1985 to John Barth’s 1986 “Few Words on Minimalism” in the *New York Times*—honed in on its simultaneous “slightness of story” (Herzinger 7) and the “artistic effect . . . enhanced by a radical economy of artistic means” (Barth). Monographs on Carver have tended to emphasize how he “thrives on omission” (Meyer 29–30), echoing critical ac-

counts of Hemingway. As in Hemingway, by providing “shells of story, fragile containers of compressed meaning” (Hallett 488), minimalism has often been seen to make readers “aware of the spaces between words” (Karl 384) and to construct events not spoken, filling in the larger narrative around the moments a story has excerpted from it. By requiring reader “collaboration” (Runyon 1) or interpellating its readers as “assemble[rs]” of the narrative (Clark 107), therefore requiring them to invest in the story, minimalism’s sparseness of style has in turn been seen as a “strategy for leading the reader to a deeper emotional response” (Bellamy 16). This has become such a commonplace in criticism about minimalism that Fredric Jameson simply assumes it as an aside in a larger account of realism’s management of affect: the “withholding” (191) of affect in minimalism articulates more affective content than verbal language ever could and makes it “emerge all the more powerfully for the reader.” In this essay, I have proposed approaching minimalism differently, not as a “discourse of exclusion” (Trussler 35) or incomplete style that requires readers to complete the work, especially emotionally, but as the manifestation of an underlying practice. This, I think, helps get at what is distinctive about minimalism as a style. In literature, withholding information is not unique to minimalism; indeed, the short story as a genre—to which minimalism has most frequently, but not exclusively, been attached—necessarily fragments a total narrative or, in the popular phrase, gives us just a slice of life. What is distinctive about the sentences of writers including Carver and Robison is not that their narratives are incomplete but that they write sentences that aim at a different kind of completion: the safe space sealed off from a threatening world. In Robison’s hyper-attribution of speech and Carver’s repetitions, style is characterized not by a consistent minimization but by a larger practice of detoxification.

In shifting our focus from minimalism as a negative project of withdrawal (“quiet”) to a positive project of detoxification (“please . . . please”), I am also asking us to reframe minimalism apart from the primarily affective terms in which it has been understood in American literary criticism. Most influentially, Mark McGurl has observed:

For the postwar student venturing into the hazardous space of the creative writing workshop, the minimalist aestheticization of “Dick-and-Jane prose” is a re-performance, in a more elevated setting, of the original acquisition of the verbal self-control for which the children’s primer was the program. . . . The very shortness of the short forms associated with minimalism (and with creative writing instruction in general) puts “mastery of form,” a solid sense of completion, within visible reach of the student. (294)

For McGurl, style is a drama of humiliation translated into craft, with masterful sentences substituting for the feeling of having first been mastered by a social institution of prestige out of authorial control. In turn, minimalism manages an affective dialectic of shame and pride. On the one hand, lower-middle-class writers, who are shamed in their incorporation into the postwar and formerly elite American university, diminish and shorten their writing, withdrawing the self that has been shamed. On the other hand, minimalism as craft—the exquisite, controlled sentence—replaces class shame with artisanal triumph. Minimalism both is motivated by shame and expresses pride.

Although I have learned a great deal from his thinking, I worry that McGurl's depiction of minimalism is both too general, in its formulation of a universal shame/pride circuit, and too specific, in its tethering to the single institutional context of the university. Certainly shame is an affect many writers experience, but not every writer is a minimalist. Furthermore, a causal relation between shame and writing—more shame equals less writing as a substitution for control—is too loose to get at the complexity within the sentences of Carver and Robison: first, because the formula should predict that they write not only fewer words but also fewer stories and books (which they do not); and, second, because even the sentences do not only subtract but also add and multiply: “please . . . please” and “screamed . . . screamed.” Detoxification, as an action, better captures this tendency in the writing, including the ambivalent affective economy that lives within it. Detoxification is about the creation of space through both the negativity opposed to environment and the positivity oriented to imbibing little words like so many detoxicants. And because of the great many anxieties that are projected onto the environment—toxic risk, racial threat, sexual violence—detoxification is not about one institution but about a general process of adapting to a threatening world.

In turn, detoxification also provides an underlying connection between minimalist writers and, as I mentioned above, minimalist artists and musicians who do not occupy the same class position as Carver and Robison and whose work is therefore less easily explained by their entrance into elite institutions. The musical theorist with the greatest influence on the generation of American musicians who would become minimalists was John Cage, whose work in the 1950s abandoned composition in the traditional sense in order to pursue new methods for framing naturally occurring—as opposed to artificially programmed and manufactured—acoustics, because “environmental sounds and noises are more useful aesthetically than

the sounds produced by the world's musical cultures" (Foreword ix). Thus, Cage's most famous work, *4'33"* (1952), in which performers are instructed not to play a note, reframed four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence as actually being full of the unintentional sounds of the venue and audience. Cage called this an "inclusive rather than exclusive" process ("Experimental Music: Doctrine" 13) and an act of "opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment" ("Experimental Music" 8). As Cage further developed this musical discovery of the environment in the 1960s and 1970s, he framed it in increasingly pressing ecocritical terms, stressing the identification between musical process and "nature / in her manner of operation" ("45'" 155). He was, in the way I discussed Hemingway in the previous section, a conservationist who turned to nature to figure and safekeep human production and meaning.

At first, this orientation toward nature may seem similar to that of La Monte Young, who began corresponding with Cage in 1959 and with whom it is often said "minimalism proper begins" (Alex Ross 536). Young's music is habitually discussed in relation to his childhood experiences with environmental sound growing up in a log cabin in Idaho. But Young's work does not explore silence as the presentation of environmental noise; nor does his work aim to imitate what Cage called "nature in her manner of operation" and what Young calls "the natural resonance of the woods" (Young and Zazeela), such as the frequency at which birds sing. Instead of silence stuffed with environment, Young developed new technologies of sustained tones or drones, which, by presenting a single frequency for an extended period of time, provide a buffer from environmental sound. His most influential work is *Trio for Strings* (1958), which includes notes to be held continuously by violin, viola, and cello. It lasts nearly an hour and averages just over one note per minute. His *Compositions 1960 #7*, whose score includes only a B-flat and an F-sharp and the instructions "To be held for a long time" (Potter 51), is perhaps his most playful, drawing from his time presenting with Fluxus in Yoko Ono's New York City loft. Young explained in a lecture that year that he preferred long sounds because it "can be easier to get inside of them" (81); he "began to see how each sound was its own world." Whereas Cage framed the world, Young carves out spaces released from the world.

A friend of Cage's called this droning music "like being in a womb," and it was this effect that led Cage to dislike it; in his 1965 "Diary," he recalls being "relieved to be / released" from Young's

composition (16). Cage was “interested in any art not as a closed-in thing by itself but as a going-out one to interpenetrate with all other things” (“On Film” 115). Young’s goals were the opposite: enclosure and isolation. And like Carver and Robison, he understood this enclosure as a prerequisite for forming intimacy. His most sustained work, the *Dream House*, began as a site-specific installation in the Church Street loft Young and his wife Marian Zazeela moved into after their marriage in the summer of 1963 and in which they have continued to reside ever since (they claim not to have spent a day apart from each other since they met on June 22, 1962). The *House* consists of neon lights installed by Zazeela and a persistent hum of sustained tones composed by Young. The sustained tones sound at a frequency that is a prime number multiple of the “power line frequency, which functions as the underlying drone of the city” (Duckworth and Fleming 214). The underlying hum of electrical appliances does not interfere with or distort the tones of the composition, because the appliances are in sync with the tones. In turn, the only sonic interference in the *Dream House* is that which occurs as a sound wave interacts with itself as it is reflected off the room’s walls. The cumulative effect is a kind of noise-cancellation chamber in which Young and Zazeela could live protected from the sounds of the outside world. Within *Dream House* is a stylistic formula for the production of partnered intimacy through the detoxification of ambience. Terry Riley, another foundational minimalist composer and sometimes collaborator of Young, has called Young and Zazeela “eternal cosmic lovers” (qtd. in Duckworth and Fleming 103) whose love was produced by finding the perfect sound, “the perfected object of a lifelong yearning” (98). Young’s experiments with finely programmed frequencies sustained long enough to live inside constitute a permanent project of erecting domesticity through de-pollution. While Cage called for a release of the impulse toward technological control of nature—if not a return to nature—Young called for a tuning out of nature, a creation of technologically mediated ways of living within a hum in which nature’s toxicities are inaudible.

Donald Judd, the foremost creator of minimalist sculpture, aimed for a similar effect in his work, as he theorized it in a series of reviews of other artists in the 1960s. He acknowledged the technical perfection of Richard Ruben’s paintings at a show in spring 1962 but complained about their color, which gave “the idea which is primarily that of landscape painting” (“April 1962” 50); ditto Raymond Parker, whose paintings depict summer as too “naturalistic” (“May/June 1962” 51) and whose “blue-gray combination is redolent of

landscapes and is ordinary.” By winter of that year, Judd had realized that what irked him about the allusion to natural landscapes—in these cases through color, but in sculpture often through shape—was how it was “always indefinite in meaning” (“Dec. 1962” 61). Nature was too general. In contrast, what Judd praised about Lee Bontecou’s sculptures in January 1963 (and Judd rarely praised other work, at least in his reviews) was that, instead of “inducing idealization and generalization and being allusive, the object excludes. It is actual and specific and is experienced as an object” (“January 1963” 65) Three years before “Specific Objects,” the essay and name for the kind of plastic art he practiced and advocated for, would appear in print, Judd uses the phrase “specific . . . object” in a review he wrote after a year of rejecting generalized depictions of nature; the objects he wants “exclude” or push out nature.

Judd pushed out nature in his own work in part by turning to the industrial materials of iron, brass, bronze, aluminum, and Plexiglass instead of the general material of wood. His contributions to the “Primary Structures” group exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1966, which introduced minimalism to a wider American audience, were two formally identical objects composed of four 40-inch galvanized iron cubes connected with a painted aluminum bar that ran along the front top of each. The materials were galvanized to protect against rust and therefore already inoculated from natural forces; but the objects are impenetrable in another way, too. By placing one on the floor and one on the wall, Judd seems to offer total inspection of the pair: you cannot see the bottom of the object rested on the floor, but you can compensate by observing the bottom of the one on the wall, and vice versa with the side obscured by the wall. But this only brings into relief that each object is by itself always incompletely available, gaining release from inspection by hiding behind a surface that lends it support. Cumulatively, these principles of composition—the artificial construction process with galvanized materials, the retreat of one side from observation, the ordering of a solid body—devise a method of forming the object that releases it from an ecological circuitry of natural feedback.

To view such a work as the detoxification of a body recasts two of the fundamental commonplaces of minimalist criticism. The order and fabrication of minimalist objects has usually been read (and was presented by Judd and others) as a rebellion against the romantic abstract expressionism of the 1950s, paradigmatically Jackson Pollock’s masturbatory transformation of the canvas into the space of his own individual action. To mechanize artistic production was to

reject not only the myth of artist as expressive genius but also the artist as maker at all. If, in turn, the object could not be seen as a means toward accessing artistic subjectivity, and if, furthermore, the generally nonhierarchical compositions of these objects made it so that a principle of organization could not be found within the object, then analysis was referred outward from the object and onto the space of the gallery and the experience of the audience. Minimalism's negative project of de-subjectification of the self became as well the positive project of the creation of a public; its bar to interior access motivated exterior consideration of social space and social interaction. This was Michael Fried's famous complaint about the art, which referred meaning to the spectator. But whereas accounts of exteriorization (the way in which minimalism thrusts the viewer back into her immediate perceptive and social situation) have assumed the goodness of the exterior that is newly emphasized (the social good), they have not as readily explored the impulse for getting the object away, or shielding it, from the environment in the first place. To cut off the feedback between environment and object is not only to raise up the environment as the proper object but also to remove the material object from the environment.

The style of someone like John Cage or Ernest Hemingway is a practice of conservation, housing natural environments or sublimating the human into natural proxies. In contrast, for the makers we have come to call minimalists, the environment represents a toxic threat that needs to be removed or repaired. It perhaps goes without saying that, in each of these media, detoxification does not solve the fact of toxicity that animates this strategy of repair. The problem is in part an insufficient attunement to the ecological circuit in which humanity is both a part of and yet specially positioned apart from nature; at times, the *Dream House* of Young or the "screamed . . . screamed" of Robison makes it seem like getting away from nature can get you away from toxicity, when the point is that this is impossible. But from another angle, it is precisely the impossibility of a simple solution that contributes to the attractiveness of detoxification for affording the fantasy of repair: the sense that the world's perceived threats can be kept at bay as long as this musical tone is held or repeated, as long as this object remains impermeably dense, as long as we keep saying "please . . . please." Detoxification produces domestic fantasies of intimacy, with all the racial and sexual encoding they tend to prefer, through the simultaneous fantasy of environmental repair, of erecting spaces and bodies in which all that seems toxic about the world cannot, temporarily, sound or appear.

Notes

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1. Elsewhere, Danto elaborates, “an individual does not cause his basic actions to happen. When an individual *M* performs a basic action *a*, there is no event distinct from *a* that both stands to *a* as cause to effect and is an action performed by *M*” (“Basic Actions” 142).
2. Following Ulrich Beck’s understanding of the global distribution of risk, Heise argues: “Representing complex and global technoeconomic systems as a source of risk is one of the challenges that faces contemporary narrative, and no canonical form has yet emerged in response. It may well be that such a narrative architecture will have to rely on more experimental forms of storytelling, and perhaps even on the resources of new narrative media such as the multiple links of hypertext. What shape narrative innovation will take in the risk society is the uncertainty that literary critics face at the turn of the millennium” (773). Although I dispute Heise’s conclusion, mostly because I think she has made an error in trying to find narratives adequate to the systematic production of risk in novels that are explicitly about systematic production of risk (her case studies are Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* and Richard Powers’s *Gain*), I nonetheless am immensely indebted to Heise’s early articulation of the value of sociological theories of risk for the study of literary text.
3. “Out of Season,” the story he claims in his memoirs to have been the occasion of his coming to understand and become conscious of his iceberg style, provides a useful example. In the narratological logic of the story, human emotions often proceed from environmental changes: “The sun came out” (138) and then “The young gentleman felt relieved.” When Hemingway omits human expression, it is often sublimated into natural description, so instead of telling us the depressed drunk Peduzzi is depressed, Hemingway tells us he “looked at the stream discolored by the melting snow.” In the affective ecology of “Out of Season,” changes in the natural environment—meteorological, climatological—both ground expressed emotional content and receptively absorb content that is otherwise not expressed. Much of Hemingway’s work formulates his narrative ecology—redaction of human story, production of natural proxies—as I have suggested briefly by way of his titles.
4. In this respect, Carver departs not only from Hemingway but also from intermediary midcentury writers of suburban domesticity like John Cheever. The protagonist of one of Cheever’s most anthologized short

stories, “The Swimmer,” decides one midsummer afternoon to “reach his home by water,” by which he means jump from swimming pool to swimming pool on the way from his friend’s house to his own eight miles south (603). The satire is that this is only possible because of the architectural conformity of the suburbs: every house has a swimming pool. But even as the river of swimming pools highlights the unnaturalness of suburban life, the story itself synchronizes natural climate with the protagonist’s mood. As he approaches home and it becomes clear that he has fallen from grace in the neighborhood, losing friends as well as his family, the season becomes autumnal: the temperature falls and it begins to storm. At first, Cheever’s swimming pools may seem cut off from the natural world, but, like Hemingway, the natural world still serves to mirror and absorb human emotion. Nature feels out for the emotions the protagonist swims into. For Carver’s Claire and Ralph, in contrast, nature must be left behind.

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