Contemporary American Poetry and Globalization: Ben Lerner and Juliana Spahr

Supervisor: Dr. Sarah Posman

Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels” by Esther De Baecke

May 2015
Some say that the fairest thing upon the dark earth is a host of antiarmor AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, and others again a fleet of ships.

[...]

But I say it’s whatever you love best.

I say it is the persons you love.

I say it is those things, whatever they are, that one loves and desires.

[...]

For me naught else, it is my beloveds, it is the loveliest sight.

(Spahr, CEL 46-7, ll. 15-7; 27-30; 35)

I wish all difficult poems were profound.

Honk if you wish all difficult poems were profound. (Lerner, LF 23; ll. 13-4)
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisor Dr. Sarah Posman for introducing me to the poetry of Ben Lerner and Juliana Spahr. I additionally am highly grateful for her diligent corrections and suggestions as to how to improve my writing. Also, I wish to thank her for the weekly writing exercises of the modernist literature course, as she encouraged us to take control and tell our stories, saying that “you are the bus drivers”.

I hope I make a good bus driver who smoothly steers the readers through this story of mine and like Ben Lerner put it, I too “want to give/ in a minor key/ the biggest sense” (Lerner, MFP 66; ll. 25-7).

Obviously, I want to thank my friends for helping me laugh. God knows I needed it at times. I also wish to thank the two people that ‘spawned’ and supported me, not in the least by always restocking our cabinet with Nutella and Ben & Jerry's. Thank you for letting me complain and go on and on about things, even when you had no idea what I was talking about. “Ge zijt merci!” A last, but nonetheless big shout out goes out to my grandmother, uncle and my late grandfather for more than I can mention.

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 5  
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................ 7  
List of Abbreviations ......................................................................................................................... 9  
Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 11  

Chapter I: Globalization and Its Effects on the Individual .............................................................. 14  
1. The Concept Globalization ......................................................................................................... 14  
2. Globalization versus Technology, Locality, and Ecology ............................................................. 16  
3. Globalization and Jean-Luc Nancy ............................................................................................... 19  
   3.1. Globalization and Mondialisation ......................................................................................... 19  
   3.2. Being and Being-with ........................................................................................................... 21  
4. Zygmunt Bauman on Globalization and Modernization ............................................................... 24  
5. Overview ....................................................................................................................................... 28  

Chapter II: Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 31  
1. The Lyrical I in Relation to Personal, Individual Identity .............................................................. 31  
   1.1. Fragmentation and Individualization in the Works by Ben Lerner .................................... 31  
   1.2. Intimacy and Determination in the Works of Juliana Spahr .............................................. 39  
2. The Lyrical I in Relation to Community and Connection to Others ........................................ 50  
   2.1. Community and Connection in Lerner’s *The Lichtenberg Figures* and *Mean Free Path* ........................................................................................................ 50  
   2.2. Community in Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and *Well Then There Now* ........................................................................................................ 62  
3. Modernity and Politics ................................................................................................................ 72  
   3.1. Modernity, Technology and Politics in the Works by Ben Lerner ..................................... 72  
   3.2. Politics, Technology and Ecology in the Works of Juliana Spahr ..................................... 85  

Conclusions ..................................................................................................................................... 97  

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 101
1. Primary Sources .......................................................................................................................... 101
2. Secondary Sources ................................................................................................................... 101
3. Illustrations ............................................................................................................................... 103
Appendix ........................................................................................................................................ 104

1. Lerner, The Lichtenberg Figures ............................................................................................... 104
   1.1. Cover ....................................................................................................................................... 104
   1.2. Spadix – Spathe .................................................................................................................. 105
2. Lerner, Mean Free Path ............................................................................................................. 106
   2.1. Cover ....................................................................................................................................... 106
3. Spahr, This Connection of Everyone with Lungs ...................................................................... 107
   3.1. Cover ....................................................................................................................................... 107
4. Spahr, Well Then There Now .................................................................................................... 108
   4.1. Cover ....................................................................................................................................... 108
   4.2. Example of Two Mirroring Sonnets in *Well Then There Now* ......................................... 109
   4.3. Illustrations to “Dole Street” ............................................................................................... 109
   4.4. Illustrations to “2199 Kalia Street” ..................................................................................... 110
   4.5. Example of a Section of *Well Then There Now* with Map and Geographic Coordinates .................................................................................................................................................................................. 112

(24 690 words)
List of Abbreviations

Primary Sources

LF  Ben Lerner  The Lichtenberg Figures (2004)
MFP  Ben Lerner  Mean Free Path (2010)

CEL  Juliana Spahr  This Connection of Everyone with Lungs (2005)
WTTN  Juliana Spahr  Well Then There Now (2011)

Secondary Sources

CWG  Jean-Luc Nancy  The Creation of the World or Globalization (2002)
IGW  Zygmunt Bauman  Individualization in the Globalizing World (2001)
IS  Zygmunt Bauman  The Individualized Society (2001)
Introduction

Globalization is a complex process that involves an increased contact on a global scale. It is a process that rapidly accelerated due to multiple twentieth century inventions, which were designed to make transportation and communication highly efficient and fast. Airplanes, container ships, telephones, television, cell phones and the internet, all of these developments appear to make the other side of the world accessible in the blink of an eye.

It is a process that increasingly is changing society and affecting the way how people communicate and connect with one another. More than ever people are connected with one another, beyond the boundaries of space and time, especially in Western society. However, although it has the potential to connect, philosophers and sociologists like Jean-Luc Nancy and Zygmunt Bauman respectively consider globalization to be a process of disintegration and individualization. A process that creates a world in which individuals have to rely on themselves to find their way in life and in which contact with others is increasingly problematic.

With this dissertation I wish to shed a light on how these contemporary societal developments are reflected on in contemporary poetry. More precisely, I will analyse how globalization and modernization are dealt with in the works of two Ben Lerner and Juliana Spahr, whom I will now shortly introduce.

Ben Lerner (born in 1979 in Topeka, Kansas, in the Midwest of the U.S.) is a poet, but also a novelist, critic and an academic. Currently, he is an English professor in Brooklyn College. Both his poetry and novel are much acclaimed. Among the awards and nominations Lerner received are the Hayden Carruth Award (2003), the Preis der Stadt Münster für internationale Poesie (2011), and the Believer Book Award (2012).
Juliana Spahr was born in 1966 in Chillicothe, Ohio (Midwestern U.S.). She is active in almost areas involving writing, since she is a poet, novelist, editor, academic and critic. Spahr is an English Professor who has taught at Siena College, the University of Hawai‘i and currently teaches at Mills College, California. Like Lerner’s, Spahr’s poetic work has been much acclaimed and rewarded with the National Poetry Series Award for her collection *Response* (1996) and the Hardison Poetry Prize (2009).

There are two major components to this dissertation. In the first chapter, I will construct the theoretical framework. This framework comprises an analysis of the concept of globalization and its effects on i.a. the individual, society, ecology, etc. In regard to the effect of globalization on the individual and society, I will mostly focus on the theories of the already mentioned Zygmunt Bauman and Jean-Luc Nancy.

The theoretical framework will then function as the spine of my literary analysis, which is the second major part of this dissertation. Concretely, the poetry collections I will be investigating are *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004) and *Mean Free Path* (2010) by Ben Lerner, and *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* (2005) and *Well Then There Now* (2011) by Juliana Spahr.

The poetic analysis will mainly focus on three aspects. Firstly, I will analyse how globalization and modernization affect the representations of the lyrical I and individual. Secondly, I will investigate how these processes affect the connection with others, i.e. with a significant other or with a community. Lastly, I wish to examine how globalization and modernization shape the lyrical I’s view on politics, ecology and technology.
This dissertation explores uncharted territory seeing that the correlation between globalization theories and there exist no comparative studies that investigate the correlation between contemporary theories of globalization and modernization, and contemporary poetry. Whereas the globalization theories of i.a. Bauman, Nancy, Beck are influential within sociological and political studies, they hardly ever are applied to literature and poetry.

Additionally, little academic research has been done on either Lerner or Spahr. In the case of Lerner, the secondary materials is non-existent, aside from reviews and interviews. Furthermore, the research on Spahr's work is quite specific, and never deals with the effects of globalization in a broader sense. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, this will be the first study that compares these two contemporary poets.

In general my methodology focuses on a close reading of the works of these poets and an analysis via the globalization theories, however the secondary sources on Spahr were incorporated when suitable.

With this dissertation, I wish to reflect on how globalization affects the writing of contemporary poets as well as to show how an understanding of theory can contribute to the interpretation of poetry and vice versa. Additionally, I hope to build a bridge between the theorists’ analyses of contemporary society and the poets’ self-expression, which both is a product of and a reflection on said society.
Chapter I: Globalization and Its Effects on the Individual

In this first chapter of my dissertation, I will construct the theoretical framework that I will apply in my analysis of the works of Ben Lerner and Juliana Spahr. More specifically, this framework will support my analysis of how these poets in their works reflect on the self and relations with others, for which I will mostly rely on the discussion of the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Zygmunt Bauman, and how they critically engage with technology, politics and modernity in general, for which I will base myself upon i.a. Imre Szeman.

1. The Concept Globalization

In his work *Globalization and Everyday Life* (2007), sociologist Larry Ray states that even though globalization has been and is approached from a great many different perspectives – i.a. political, economical, cultural, technological, sociological –, and has found a way into both academic and everyday discourses, “the meaning and significance of globalization remains far from clear” (1-2).

This, according to Imre Szeman, is especially true for the use of the concept since the last two decades of the previous century, when the term became more popular, more extensively used and was interpreted in various ways (Szeman 209). Though originally a term connected to the rise of capitalism in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, its application later spread to other – almost all – aspects of contemporary society such as politics, culture, etc. (cf. Kearney 550; cf. Szeman 211).

Because of its extensive scope and its being used both in academic and popular contexts, the concept of globalization is at times considered hollowed out (cf. Szeman 209). Certain critics, like Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, argue that the term has become “a fashionable concept in the social sciences” used ideologically to justify the
swift spread of neo-liberal capitalism (qt. in Szeman 211). Imre Szeman articulates a similar attitude towards the term when he declares that globalization is a concept that is already in danger of becoming simply a short-lived buzzword of the age. While the term seems to capture a genuine sense of the dizzying changes that have transformed the world, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, the real explanatory value of globalization has been placed increasingly into doubt over the past several years. (209-10)

As the above quote shows, Szeman’s criticism – like that of Hirst and Thompson – is mainly due to the term being at times used too liberally.

Nevertheless, Szeman’s attitude towards the term globalization is not entirely negative. He also grants that theories of globalization can help us to consider more fully the impact of contemporary global economics and **mass communications technologies** on contemporary reality, as well as the radically **disembedded character of contemporary identities and cultures** [...]. (Emphasis EDB, 216)

For Szeman, globalization is the process that affects economy, contemporary communication, identities and cultures. In my thesis and in my use of the concept I will focus on most of the elements Szeman also focuses on. In particular those elements marked in bold in the above quote, namely the impact of technology, the sense of disembedded cultures or communities (specifically by means of the analysis of Jean-Luc Nancy) and of disembedded identities (specifically via the analysis of Zygmunt Bauman).
2. Globalization versus Technology, Locality, and Ecology

The previous quote of Imre Szeman in the previous section already hinted at the important role mass communication technology have played and play in the further expansion of globalization.

Correspondingly, sociologist Larry Ray states that “the development of digital technologies has been a major factor in increasing the speed and extent of social communications, and in many ways it epitomizes the process of globalization itself.” (Emphasis EDB, 104) According to Ray, technology in fact typify globalization.

Similarly, David Harvey also focuses on how these technologies – and the internet in particular – have augmented the swiftness and scope of communication. In his analysis, he refers to globalization as a global time-space compression (Harvey in Szeman 209). The globe has become compressed in such a way that via e.g. the internet the other side of the world is nowadays as effortlessly and quickly contacted as the house next door.

Szeman uses a comparable phrasing when he declares that the development of mass communication technology has played an “essential role in collapsing the globe spatially” and has “made it possible to conceive of the globe as a single space shared by all of humanity” (213). Additionally, he claims that this collapse and effortless, immediate transmission of information also causes humanity to “have come to share a common range of cultural referents” (Szeman 213).¹

Sociologist Manuel Castells stresses the importance of this informational flow and the internet in general. According to Castells, the internet knows no true historical precedent, seeing that no medium ever before has reached such a wide diffusion in so

¹ This will prove an important element in the work of Juliana Spahr, who often refers to news facts that are in a way expected to be (or to become) a shared reference for the reader.
little time (cf. 382). He states it has transformed society into a *network society*, a society that is characterised by its “endless connections” and its *informational capitalism*, in which it is “information itself to become the product of the production process” rather than material goods (cf. 77-8, 378). When, in the past, it was the one in control of material means and land that had the power, power now lies in the hands of those who have knowledge.

Apart from influencing the world’s economic structure, the increased flow of knowledge also have an impact on the individual in the sense that they make people contemplate modernity, globalization and their effects. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash refer to this as *reflexive modernization*. As the term already indicates, it is a mental framework that self-confrontationally reflects on the present state of being in regard to modernization and globalization (cf. Beck et al. 2-6).

Concretely, they state that because of technology and the augmented knowledge, the individual no longer lives in his own, private world, but is connected to others from all around the globe (cf. Beck et al. x-xiv). The (Western) individual is constantly made aware of the negative aspects and effects of globalization, such as environmental problems, economic and political crises, wars, racism, sexism. It is an awareness which burdens the individual with a sense of responsibility and accountability (cf. ibid).²

This burden is then further exacerbated by what Harvey refers to as the *time-space compression* of contemporary societies, caused by modern technologies. This because individuals nowadays are confronted with both local and global events. Or, as

² This burden or responsibility is quite tangible in the work of Juliana Spahr, especially in regard to (war) politics and ecology.
Castells states: “[t]he key spatial feature of the network society is the networked connection between the local and the global.” (Emphasis EDB, xxxv)

In the Western network society the local and the global are inseparably intertwined and local developments. The fact that “previously distant parts of the world have become connected in an historically unprecedented manner” and the bond between the local and global imply that “developments in one part of the world are now able to rapidly produce effects on geographically distant localities.” (Szeman 209)

Not only can the individual be concretely affected by both local and global developments (as for instance was the case in the worldwide economic crisis of 2007, originally set in motion by the mortgage crisis in the U.S.), he or she also is more aware of all that is happening on a global scale.

It is undeniable that, due to modern technologies, the global and the local have never been more closely connected and affected by one another than in the present times. Not only is it almost effortless to become informed about events happening almost anywhere, these events occurring on one place can evoke reactions elsewhere in very little time. Yet, such profound transformations and evolutions can be expected to have an impact on society as a social construction and moreover, to affect the individual. It is these social and personal impacts that I will focus on in the following section, primarily via the framework of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and sociologist of Zygmunt Bauman.
3. Globalization and Jean-Luc Nancy

3.1. Globalization and Mondialisation

In *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (2007, original title *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*), Jean-Luc Nancy discusses how globalization should be seen as a two-sided concept, rather than just the increasingly international nature of contemporary society. He argues that globalization involves the interaction of two processes, namely *globalization* and *mondialisation*.\(^3\) Notwithstanding that at first sight these terms seem interchangeable, to Nancy they are quite distinct and even antagonisms (cf. *CWG* 1-2). *Globalization*, to Nancy, is a process leading to an “un-world” (the *immonde*), whereas *mondialisation* is “world-forming” (*CWG*, 1).

To Nancy, *globalization* has a destructive nature because it transforms the world into a disintegrated, unidentifiable mess (cf. *CWG* 33-4). The world has lost its clearly contoured structures, for instance the city lost its distinct characteristics and has become “megapolitical, metropolitan, or co-urbational” or else has become part of an abstract “urban network” (cf. Nancy, *CWG* 33). According to Nancy, the abstract nature of these living environments are excellent breeding grounds for nihilism and relativism:

> The result [of the disintegration] can only be understood in terms of what is called an agglomeration, [...] that, **on the one hand**, simply **concentrates** (in a few neighborhoods, in a few houses, sometimes in a few protected mini-cities) **the well-being that used to be urban or civil**, while **on the other hand**, **proliferates** what bears the quite simple and unmerciful name of **misery.** **This network** cast upon the planet [...]  

\(^3\)Throughout my thesis I use globalization to refer to the concept in general. When referring to Nancy’s concept, the term will be italicised.
deforms the orbis as much as the urbs. The agglomeration invades and erodes what used to be thought of as globe and which is nothing more now than its double, glomus. In such a glomus, we see the conjunction of an indefinite growth of techno-science, of a correlative exponential growth of populations, of a worsening of inequalities of all sorts within these populations—economic, biological, and cultural—and of a dissipation of the certainties, images, and identities of what the world was with its parts and humanity with its characteristics. The civilization that has represented the universal and reason—also known as the West—cannot even encounter and recognize any longer the relativity of its norms and the doubt on its own certainty [...] (CWG 33-4)

To describe the effect of globalization, Nancy uses the metaphor of a “network cast upon the planet”, and states it is a network that polarizes, rather than connects (CWG 33). It polarises, because it encourages wealth for the elite and on the other hand, makes way for misery for the rest. This globalized network literally and figuratively deforms the entire world (cf. Nancy, CWG 33-5).

In this deformed world Nancy sees the concurrence of expanding “techno-science” and an increasing amount of doubt in regard to norms and makes contemporary (Western) beings more prone to nihilism and cynicism (cf. CWG 33-5). It can be said that in the globalization process of Nancy technology and a belief in “techno-

---

4 Similarly, in his theories to describe contemporary society, Manuel Castells talks about a network society (because of its being characterised by the heightened speed and augmented amount of transmitted information)(see supra).

5 Nancy’s view here more or less coincides with those of David Harvey (time-space compression of the globalised world) and Imre Szeman (globalization and modern technology “collapsing the globe spatially” (213)) which I discussed in the previous section.
"science" take the place of norms and certainties. In this regard, Nancy’s attitude is quite similar to Bauman’s, who notices a rise of nihilism and cynicism in contemporary individuals (see infra).

As an alternative praxis to live by, Nancy proposes mondialisation, a “world-forming” process that centres around creation and enjoyment (cf. CWG 55). However, the creation of mondialisation is not without struggle, in fact, to Nancy creation implies that people should “immediately, without delay, [reopen] each possible struggle for a world” that aims to be “the contrary of a global injustice against the background of general equivalence.” (CWG 54-5)

In other words, mondialisation, according to Nancy, is world-forming because it struggles with the “global injustice” of the globalization and wishes to create, “whether collective or individual”, rather than dissolve (cf. (CWG 33-5; 52-5).

3.2. Being and Being-with

In addition to the humans’ need to create, Nancy stresses the importance of the being-with. In Being Singular Plural (2000, Être singulier pluriel), Jean-Luc Nancy develops the notion that, in a society, it is the collective that precedes the individual, not the other way around. He states that society builds its foundations on coexistence and sees a collective being-with (l’être-avec) as necessary to the creation of the individual being (l’être) (cf. BSP 12-5).

The terminology here used by Nancy is borrowed from Heidegger: Being and being-with respectively referring to Dasein and Mitsein. Nancy, known to be a Heidegger scholar himself, uses the work of Heidegger as a starting point for his own, but wishes to correct and elaborate on it. According to Nancy, Heidegger’s view exaggerates the importance of the existential Dasein and in the end sees the Mitsein as secondary to the
individual (cf. BSP 93-5). Being Singular Plural in a way is Nancy's attempt to rectify and improve Heidegger's theory.

This since Nancy focuses on the being-with as the root of life, rather than the Being. For Nancy, one can only create a sense of individuality or Being in the bigger context of a shared collective (cf. Nancy, Being 30-1). Additionally, it is the collective, the we, that is what creates and generates meaning in the world (cf. Nancy, BSP 2).

Without the collective, the world would be meaningless, since, according to Nancy, “[t]here is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of Being.” (BSP 2) In this quote he also mentions that meaning comes into existence through the collective, as well as through the individuals sharing their own Beings.

It is therefore that Nancy sees society not as an assembly of atomic individuals, but of a collective unit (cf. BSP 30-35). According to Nancy, society, is a we and a being-with that sooner is a singular plural, a unit of its own, than a collection of separate particles (cf. BSP 32-3). Nancy's we is a singular plural as it expresses a unit through the fusion of multiple "ones" (cf. BSP 76). Additionally, this singular plural knows neither complete solitude (no one ever truly is alone), nor the existence of the Other (the Other merely is the other-within-the-self, the alter ego, a part of the singular plural) (cf. Nancy, BSP 76-9; 87-91).

The mechanism that exposes society as being a singular plural entity, according to Nancy, is language (cf. BSP 84-5). It is the mechanism that spreads and allows the sharing of meaning and an utterance only gets meaning in the bigger context of being-with, through multiple speakers (cf. Nancy, BSP 85-8).
Without being shared and known by more than one Being, language has no meaning and cannot transfer messages. Language necessarily belongs to the realm of the being-with, as one only ever adopts a language in order to communicate with others.

Additionally, one can argue that language is a communal practice based on sharing as it has a symbolical nature and can only be meaningful if there is a consensus in terms of the meaning of certain utterances (cf. Nancy, BSP 86-8). However, according to Nancy, language is much more than a mere mechanism or instrument, it contains the essence of Being, namely communication (cf. BSP 93). Nancy argues that “communication is Being, and Being is, as a consequence, nothing but the incorporeal by which bodies express themselves to one another as such.” (BSP 93) It is communication, self-expression and exposure to others that allows the being-with to grow organically (cf. BSP 3-5; 17).

Here, I would like to make a small addition to Nancy’s theory. Seeing that language, according to Nancy, is a tell-tale marker for the existence of being-with, I would like to argue that literature and, of special importance to this dissertation, poetry too could be interpreted as ways of being-with. This since (published) literature and poetry, like language, revolve around self-expression, exposure to others and communication. Additionally, it can be said that these forms are unique in this aspect because they link the highly personal and individual self-expression to communication with others. In my analysis I will come back to this point by comparing how Ben Lerner and Juliana Spahr are quite different in their way of sharing and communicating with their readers.

To return to globalization, it is quite clear that a tension must arise between the ever increasing disintegration due to globalization on the one hand (as also described by
Nancy through the term *globalization*, and on the other hand the collective *being-with* as a prerequisite for a meaningful existence.

Members of contemporary Western society seem ill-fated as they require a collective society to thrive and yet are living in a crumbling and nihilistic world in which sharing is rendered almost useless (cf. Nancy, *CWG* 3-4; Nancy, *BSP* 45-6).

According to Nancy globalization is a threat to the *Being*, since its craving for the sharing and collectivity of the *being-with* clash with *globalization*'s atomization and dispersion (cf. *BSP* 45). It can be stated that in contemporary society, the *Being*'s life contains a constant tension between a deteriorating collectivity, decaying certainties and an augmenting necessity of relying on oneself.

4. **Zygmunt Bauman on Globalization and Modernization**

A similar observation in regard to the heightened self-reliance of contemporary individuals can be found in the works of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. He regards modernity as a living condition in which collective bonds lose their strength, in which members are reduced to atomic individuals, rather than being part of a community (cf. *IS* 105).

For Bauman, modernity is the act of breaking away from tradition and communal habits (cf. *IS*, 16-7). It is break with tradition that, according to Bauman, originates in the Renaissance and substantially intensified at the beginning of the twentieth century (cf. *IS* 15-8). With this rupture also came an immense sense of freedom and the idea of being able to start anew (cf. Bauman, *IS* 15-8; 90).

Where individuals’ lives used to be determined by predestination, modern individuals are increasingly encouraged to self-create and design their own life path, or using Bauman’s term, their life project (cf. Bauman, *IGW* 122-3; cf. Bauman, *IS* 90).
However, this (newly) acquired freedom, also comes with a prize, as the individual is now responsible for his or her own success or failure. In Bauman’s words, the formation of one’s identity has morphed “from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’” (cf. Bauman, IS 16-9; 90). Individuals feel that is their duty to develop oneself, they are “needing to become” (Bauman, IS 90).

Additionally, contemporary life is *disembedded*, it is *liquid* and in constant flux (cf. Bauman LM 1-8). Bauman describes pre-modern society as a *solid* with stable and accepted values, however, with the rise of individual critical thinking (with the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment) also came the idea that society’s *solids* could be improved and interchanged for new, *true solids* in which the individuals could *re-embed* themselves (cf. LM 1-8; cf. IS 11-2). This stage he refers to as the *solid modernity*.

The problem for Bauman lies in the fact that by the time the old *solids* were molten and had gone, the search for new *solids* was overruled by individualization and the importance of the individual’s pursuit of happiness (ibid.).

In such a world, in which the self-determining individual is pursuing his or her own *life project* and has the urge to break free from any imposing “fetters or shackles”, no order or value succeeds in becoming a collective, stable solid for society to build upon. Therefore, the orders and values remain *liquid* and society is constantly in flux (ibid.). As Bauman states, “’[d]isembeddedness’ [...] is likely to be repeated an unknown number of times in the course of an individual life since few if any ‘beds’ for ‘re-embedding’ look solid enough to augur the stability of long occupation.” (Bauman, IS 92)⁶

---

⁶ This idea of there no longer being a stable repose will prove important for my analysis of Ben Lerner’s work, which is highly focussed on expressing the idea of fluctuation and fragmentation.
Seeing that there are neither bulletproof certainties anymore, nor a “prospect of a ‘final re-embeddedness’”, there can be no true rest or comfort for the individual, who is “constantly on the run” from one point on the life-path to another (Bauman, IS 92).

This liquid individualization then also has an impact on the individual’s relationship to others: seeing that there is no more certainty, there equally no longer lies a security in relations with others, especially since they too are all individuals searching for the best opportunities (cf. Bauman, LM 135-6).

Sociologist Ulrich Beck observes a similar evolution of individualising disintegration. He states that nowadays traditional communal forms are evermore disappearing, with the exception of the family (cf. 36). Yet, even here Beck notices an inclination of the individual family members towards focusing on those networks chosen on one’s own accord (ibid.).

Additionally, Beck remarks how contemporary social relationships are reflexive: they are no longer set in stone for a lifetime, but “have to be established, maintained and constantly renewed by individuals. (ibid.)

The reflexive character of contemporary relationships, noticed by Beck, functions as a parallel term to Bauman’s liquidity of human relationships. Relationships nowadays are chosen and maintained only if they fit into the individual’s life project (cf. Bauman, LT 14; cf. Beck 36). However, Beck in this aspect is a little more optimistic as he does not believe atomization to be a necessary consequence of individualisation. Bauman (as Nancy) on the other hand sees an evolution towards a world filled with isolated individuals.
Bauman has a negative view on contemporary individuals, saying that they are characterized by a “growing nihilism and cynicism”, a “short-sightedness”, an “indifference to long-term life projects”, “selfishness” in pursuing desires and an “inclination to slice life into episodes, each to be squeezed to the last drop with no concern for the consequences” (IS 35-6).

And yet, he does not necessarily judge this kind of behaviour. In fact, he states that this is only a natural reaction in a world that has been robbed of its security. The latter, he believes to be a result not only of individualising, liquid modernity, but of globalization as well.

Globalization, according to Bauman, was the process that opened borders, both in a positive and a negative way. It opened borders to “trade and capital, surveillance and information, violence and weapons, crime and terrorism” (Bauman, LT 7). Alongside with this, globalization created uncertainty and fear, since an absence of boundaries also means no more protection from dangers from without (cf. Bauman, LT 7-8).

According to Bauman, globalization only reinforces the sense of uncertainty that is already present in the liquid modernity. In a globalized liquid modernity, individuals adopt a flexible lifestyle (even in regard to relationships with others) in order to escape the insecurity of living without true solids, and moreover the combination of the two processes only strengthens the development of society into a fragmented collection of individuals (cf. Bauman, LT 14).

At first, globalization – like solid modernity – emanated a sense of “self-determination” and of “openness”, but then it also brought in a sense of

---

7 Similar to Nancy’s view on globalization, which he also stated gave rise to cynical and nihilistic mentalities (see supra).
“undefendability” (ibid.). Additionally, Bauman highlights the elitist-stimulating effect of globalization, which he does by quoting Arundhati Roy, who states that “when the elite, somewhere at the top of the world, pursue their travels to imagined destinations, the poor stay caught in a spiral of crime and chaos.” (qtd. In Bauman, LT 7-8)

This final quote is highly reminiscent of that which I already cited above in the section on Nancy (see supra, Globalization and Mondialisation). Here Bauman, Roy and Nancy all have in common that they see globalization as a polarising processing, which – alongside with modernity) pulls apart society. Additionally, there are parallels between Bauman and Nancy in regard to how they assess the effects of globalization (and modernization), since both are convinced that society is becoming evermore nihilistic, relativistic and disintegrated.

5. Overview

Globalization has made many things a lot more convenient: travel, access to information, communication, etc. People at opposite ends of the world can effortlessly connect within seconds. As a result, the world has become compressed in regards to time and space, and in the sense that the local and the global having become inevitably mixed (Harvey in Szeman 209; Szeman 213). Another consequence of the effortless access to information, is the fact that people start to critically reflect on modernization, globalization and all their disagreeable effects (cf. Beck et al. 2-6).

In his analysis of globalization, Nancy mostly focuses on globalization as a process that triggers nihilism and relativism, because it deforms and disintegrates the world, stripping it of its values and certainties (cf. CWG 33-5). The only way to overcome this destructive globalization, is to counter it with the creative, “world-forming” mondialisation.
At the same time, Nancy sees globalization as a process that threatens the *being-with*, which according to Nancy lies at the heart of a thriving society. Individuals in a globalised society tend to become nihilistic and cynical, due to the disintegrated, unstable nature of said society (cf. Nancy, *CWG* 3-4; Nancy, *BSP* 45-6). As a result, many will withdraw into the *Being*, relying on themselves and not on the *being-with* (ibid.).

Similarly, Bauman remarks how society has fallen apart into a collection of atomic individuals (cf. *IS* 105). Atomic and *disembedded* individuals, who are characterised by fluctuation instead of certainty, (Bauman, *IS* 92). Modernity has endowed modern individuals with freedom, but has also turned life into a task, there is the need to *self-create* and to become someone (Bauman, *IS* 90).

If the individual wishes to achieve something, it is up to the individual him- or herself. In a *liquid modernity*, everything has become reflexive and changeable, even relationships to others, depending on how they can be accommodated into the individual's *life project* (cf. Bauman, *LT* 14; cf. Beck 36).

In general, these sociologists do not have a positive outlook on globalization. It is a disintegrating process that strips the world of certainties and stability. However, Nancy's *mondialisation* and Beck, Gidden and Lash's *reflexive modernization* can be seen as countering principles. *Mondialisation* opposes *globalization* by struggling and directly defying it.

Although *reflexive modernization* can have a paralysing or overwhelming effect, it can also be seen as an attempt to *re-embed*, as it draws attention to elements that potentially offer some stability, such as the revival of tradition or ecology, in an attempt to counter the harmful effects of globalization on the environment (cf. Beck et al. vi-ii,
Thus by contemplating alternatives to the current situation, being urged to act and change the conditions for the better.

---

8 The ecological element of *reflexive modernization* will be especially important in the analysis of the poetry of Juliana Spahr.
Chapter II: Analysis

In the previous chapter I discussed how sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman and Jean-Luc Nancy reflect on contemporary societies and the effects of globalization. In this section, these insights will function as lenses through which I look in my analysis of the poetry of Lerner and Spahr.

The analysis itself consists of three major movements, divided over subsections three, four and five. Firstly, I will analyse how the poetry of Lerner and Spahr approaches the individual. Secondly, I will discuss how the idea of community is represented. And lastly, I will examine how both poets approach politics and technology in their works.

1. The Lyrical I in Relation to Personal, Individual Identity

1.1. Fragmentation and Individualization in the Works by Ben Lerner

In Lerner’s The Lichtenberg Figures and Mean Free Path, the lyrical I is highly present, yet never comes across as a strong personality. In fact, Lerner presents his reader with a fractured and, using Bauman’s terminology, disembedded “I”.

In regard to his first collection, this is reflected in the title. In physics, Lichtenberg figures are fractured, tree-like structures of electricity running through insulating material. The title reflects the collection in the sense that its poems too are fractured and branch off into various, uncountable directions.

One the one hand, the title mimics the manner with which Lerner deals with topics in his work, seeing that Lerner constantly shifts between topics at irregular intervals and often without any logical connection between them. On the other hand, the
lyrical I also fluctuates, for instance by continually presenting the reader with a different side of himself.⁹

Both of these elements simultaneously contribute to the construction of a fragmented identity. This is quite apparent in for example the following poem of the collection:

What am I the antecedent of?
When I shave I feel like a Russian.
When I drink I’m the last Jew in Kansas.
I sit in my hammock and whittle my rebus.
I feel disease spread through me like a theory.
I take a sip from Death’s black daiquiri. (Lerner, LF 4, ll. 1-6)

In the first verse line, the lyrical I questions his identity in the poem itself: what is the relationship between the pronoun “I” as it is written down here and the identity of the person writing it down, or as Aaron Kunin stated it, “the person on the other side [of the pronoun].” (Kunin and Lerner 246)

Instead of giving a clear answer, the lyrical I just names two quite diverging snapshots of his identity (ll. 2-3). In this case, Bauman’s theories provide a frame to aid the interpretation of the poem: the lyrical I wishes to define himself, and is looking for solids, yet only finds liquids, in the form of unreliable fragments.

There is no predestination, the “I” has to rely on himself in order to construct an identity. At the same time there is a strong “[need] to become” – seeing that the lyrical I wonders what he is the antecedent of, what he will become – and an urge to self-create – as is visible in line four, in which the “I” takes control (cf. Bauman, LS 90).

⁹ Although I am aware of the distinction between author and persona, I will, when discussing the work of Ben Lerner, refer to the lyrical I with masculine pronouns. Accordingly, with Spahr’s lyrical I, I will use feminine pronouns. This because of the biographic connections, as well as to facilitate the reading process.
As is apparent from ll. 5-6, there seems to be only one certainty for the lyrical I, namely mortality, which like a (black) liquid is consumed little by little and spreads itself always further throughout the body.

The form of this stanza is quite structured and ordered. There is the consistent use of full stops, which constantly create boundaries and separate the different verse lines. Furthermore, there are similar syntactic structures and anaphora in ll. 2-3 (“When I”) and ll. 4-6 (“I”).

In contrast, the content itself is chaotic and in constant flux. Exteriorly, the persona succeeds in reconstructing himself and his identity, yet, inwardly he remains fractured and disembedded, as there are no more true certainties to fall back on.

A similar situation can be found in the sixth poem of the same collection:

I attend a class for mouth-to-mouth, a class for hand-to-hand.

I can no longer distinguish between combat and resuscitation.

I could revive my victims. I could kill a man

with a maneuver [sic] designed to clear the throat of food. (Lerner, LF 6, ll. 1-4)

The lyrical I here is in conflict with himself in regard to his power to save and destroy. The lyrical I finds that he has the power to revive and simultaneously the power to kill. Two extremities that he “can no longer distinguish”, which is reflected by the stanza’s first line, in which the persona uses a parallelism in order to express a juxtaposition: “a class for mouth-to-mouth, a class for hand-to-hand”. Externally, the two elements are identical but for the named body part, and yet they represent two opposites. It emphasizes how the identity is contradictory and fragmented, torn between vitality and destructiveness.
As was the case in the previous passage, there is consistency in form, for instance the anaphora “I”, and the repetition and parallelisms in the first line. An order which contrasts and therefore highlights the conflict and problems the persona is facing.

In addition to employing contrasts and juxtapositions technique Lerner often applies, especially in *Mean Free Path*, is a stream-of-consciousness style. Yet, instead of representing a flow of ideas, the lyrical I’s stream-of-consciousness is more staccato, containing unfinished and at times disconnected thoughts. This is the case in for instance the following passage from the first poem of the second “Doppler Elegies” section:

I want to give you, however

brief, a sense of

period, a major advancement in

I slept through, I want to understand

I want to return to our earlier

I keep a notebook for

that purpose by

their motion lights, I didn’t want

to wake you [...] (Lerner, *MFP* 59, ll. 1-9)

This section contains no full stops, only commas, making it hard for the reader to demarcate the different utterances, as it were, from one another. The content itself is quite chaotic and disconnected. The lyrical I just says whatever thoughts come to his or her mind, which, like the waves of the Doppler effect, overlap.

There is the urge to communicate, yet, the train of thought is seemingly unhinged and the many messages are never completed and/or effectively transmitted. The
thoughts, like particles in a mean free path, constantly collide with others.\textsuperscript{10} The “I” is no unitary force, but broken down into fragmented processes, which all remain “unfinished”.

Like Bauman remarks, contemporary individuals are marked a constant urge to self-create, to construct and reconstruct their individual life project. And it is this attitude that also marks the poem: a numerous amount of impulses reach the “I” from with and arise from within, and it is up to the individual to prioritise them. They become resolutions and tasks, which the lyrical I constantly assigns to himself, represented by the repetition of “I want to [...]”. However, he is unable to complete any, as they constantly bounce away and get replaced by new ones, leaving the “I” restless and fragmented.

I have already indicated how at times Lerner juxtaposes a structured form to a fragmented content. Structure is not only present in the poems themselves, but also on a macro-level, namely in the collections as a whole.

For instance, \textit{The Lichtenberg Figures} is a sonnet sequence, consisting of fifty-two fourteen-lined poems. The number is itself suggests a certain cyclicity, i.e. the number of weeks in a year. A cyclicity that is also suggested by the first and last poem of the collection in which two lines reoccur: “Real snow/ on the stage. Fake blood on the snow.[...]” (Lerner 1, ll. 11-2) and “Real snow on the stage. Fake blood on the snow.” (Lerner 52, l. 14)

These reoccurring lines, which open and close the collection, question authenticity by contrasting the “real” white and cold snow to the “fake” crimson blood

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Mean Free Path}, like \textit{The Lichtenberg Figures}, derives its title from a physics term. In physics, a mean free path is the average distance a particle travels without colliding with another particle.
on the stage. Ironically, the organic, “real snow” becomes an intruder in the make-believe, “fake” setting.

The verse line is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s well-known metaphor “All the world’s a stage”, and emphasizes the struggle of Lerner’s persona, who is conflicted in regard to who he really is. There is the urge to be composed, like an actor on the stage, as well as a desire for structure and order, represented via the cyclicality as well as the poems consistent length.

Yet, persona fails to project order onto his life, thoughts and identity. Interiorly he is fragmented and starts blending authenticity and imitation, represented by the striking image of the crimson fake blood staining the pure white.

In *Mean Free Path*, there is an even bigger contrast between form and content. The collection comprises five sections being the “Dedication”, “Mean Free Path”, “Doppler Elegies”, “Mean Free Path” and “Doppler Elegies”. In contrast to the poems of *The Lichtenberg Figures*, those of *Mean Free Path* do have a fixed stanza length.

The “Dedication” section consists of six nine-line stanzas. Each “Mean Free Path” section exists of eighteen poems of nineteen lines, all of which are divided in two stanzas of respectively ten and nine lines. Lastly, each “Doppler Elegies” part is comprised of eight poems, each divided in three nine-lined stanzas.

The structure suggests cyclicality and it is true that specific words, situations and metaphors reoccur throughout the collection. However, there is no pattern or structure as to when or where they reoccur. In contrast, the content of the poems is disintegrated and scattered throughout the entire collection. This is apparent in for instance the following two poems from the first movement of *Mean Free Path*:

Unhinged in a manner of speaking
Like horses in the city. How sad. Maybe

No maybes. Take a position. Don’t call it Night-vision green.

[...] A little book for Ari

Built to sway. [...]

[...]

You’re not listening. I’m sorry. I was thinking

How the beauty of your singing reinscribes

The hope whose death it announces. Wave (Lerner, MFP 12, ll. 1; 4-6; 12-3; 16-8)

In an unconscious effort to unify my voice

I swallow my gum. An old man weeps in the airport

Over a missed connection. The color of money is Night-vision green. Ari removes the bobby pins

I remove the punctuation. [...]

[...]

A cry goes up for plain language

In identical cities. [...]

[...]

[...] A mode of undress

[...] becomes obligatory
Elements can reoccur within one and the same poem, but can also return in multiple poems. Both are the case in these two poems, for instance the elements marked in bold in the above excerpts. However, there is no logical connection between them.

When keeping the term mean free path in mind, the chaos within the poem can be read as thoughts and different impulses within the self that constantly collide and fight for attention. The thoughts can only keep the persona’s attention for that amount of time during which they do not collide with another thought, which then rises to surface. The reoccurring elements can in this case be read as thoughts, that collided repeatedly.

Furthermore, specific lines, though they share no words, seem linked to one another and can be read as continuations of a specific train of thought. This is for instance the case in the following lines: “Unhinged in a manner of speaking” (12, l. 1), “In an unconscious effort to unify my voice” (13, l. 1) and “A cry goes up for plain language” (13, l. 10). All of these lines reflect on communication and can be read as reflections of the lyrical I in regard to his own speech and that of others.

The lyrical I expresses a difficulty to express himself, which is also reflected by the fact that not all poems end with a completed thought or a full stop, as the first poem shows. As I already mentioned, the persona’s stream-of-consciousness is not so much a flow but a series of diverging thoughts that interrupt one another so often that the overview is lost.

As Gayle Rogers points out: “Mean Free Path draws attention to the reader’s never-complete process of assembly: the work of bricolage or collage is left to the reader” (223). The reconstruction, however, is an almost impossible task, even the
lyrical I himself is confused as to what he has or has not already said: “Did I say that already?”

Thus, as was the case for *The Lichtenberg Figures*, there is a stark contrast between the outward regularity, i.e. the different sections and fixed stanza lengths, and the lyrical I’s life, thoughts and identity are scattered. Again, one can interpret this by means of Bauman’s theories. The persona, though striving for an ordered *life project*, finds himself caught by a multitude of impulses and constantly changes his “bed”. The chaos in Lerner’s work can be interpreted as the *life project* of a modern individual, whose life is not a teleological process, but a meandering, “mean free path” with many obstacles and adjustments along the way.

1.2. Intimacy and Determination in the Works of Juliana Spahr

Though Lerner’s poetry is linked to his own life – e.g. the reference to his hometown, home state, to his wife Ariana, etc. –, Spahr’s work is even more difficult to separate from her own voice and therefore comes across as a highly personal, intimate form of self-expression.

Her poetry, more so than Lerner’s, often explicitly refers to her own life. This is apparent in for instance the following section of *Well Then There Now*: “I wanted to write something about Chilicothe, I am from Chilicothe./ In my family, I was the Chilicothian. My parents were from/ somewhere else.” (Spahr, *WTTN* 148, ll. 126-8)

Apart from the place where she was born and where she grew up, Spahr frequently inserts the locations where she lives into her poetry, for example the Hawaiian beaches which often reoccur as settings for the poems in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. In *Well Then There Now*, Spahr goes even further, seeing that she
includes a map and a set of geographic coordinates before each section that reveal where the poem was written.

Furthermore, Spahr at times includes notes to accompany certain poems in the collections in which she adds some personal remarks, experiences and thoughts. This is for instance the case right before “Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003” in *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs* and the note to “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours” from *Well Then There Now*.

Lastly, there are the two essay sections “Dole Street” and “2199 Kalia Street” in *Well Then There Now*, whose narrator is even more linked to Spahr than the lyrical I of her poetry. In these intermediate essays, the narrator takes the reader along as the “I” walks around Hawai‘i.

The essay “Dole Street” opens with a picture of the Dole Street street sign (included in the appendix) and the following lines: “I live and I work on Dole Street. So I walk up and down Dole Street. Dole Street is named after Sanford B. Dole who was born in Honolulu in 1844. [...] When I first moved to Dole Street, I thought that it was named after the Dole of pineapples. But that was a relative, James Dole.” (Spahr, *WTTN* 33) As is apparent in this excerpt, the essay narrator constantly alternates between facts with snippets of the writer’s life.

Additionally, both texts are accompanied by pictures, which come across as snapshots, rather than professional photographs. These snapshots functions as mirrors as they reflect what is being described or talked about in the text.

At a certain point in “Dole Street”, the “I” inserts what seems to be a hand-drawn diagram (also included in the appendix) of Dole Street when describing that “Dole passes through the middle of the University in Hawai‘i, Manoa, where I work and why I lie in Hawai‘i.” (Spahr, *WTTN* 39)
The pictures, and especially the hand-drawn diagram, in combination with the personal remarks and observations in the text, allow the essays to be reminiscent of a personal journal or notebook, which in turn evokes a sense of intimacy and sincerity, as well as facilitates a connection between the narrator and reader.¹¹

In these essays, one finds a narrator who is confident enough to share personal, intimate information about the self with the reader. Yet, these essays deal with much more than just personal information about the narrator.

Of the two essays, “2199 Kalia Road” is the most critical and in it the narrator takes a stance towards the commercialisation of Waikīkī and wishes to raise ecological awareness, as for instance in the following excerpts:

I am fascinated with the constant disconnect between photographs of tourist locations in advertisements and the actual place, between guidebook descriptions and what you get. [...] But more often Waikīkī just makes me sad. I feel an empathy for the large amount of fellow working class Midwesterners [...] I imagine [their fake smiles] as the result of having read guidebooks about Hawai‘i and saved for years to replace if only for a week the awful Midwestern rust and environmental decay with smooth sands, warm water, and tropical breezes only to wake up and find themselves broke and here, in the decaying urban jungle of Waikīkī. [...] Public Access Shoreline Hawai‘i vs. Hawai‘i County Planning Commission, 1995 WL 515898 protects indigenous Hawaiians’ traditional and

¹¹ As I will discuss in section 2.2., Spahr often wishes to evoke a sense of connection with her readers. Other examples are the bloodstream and breathing metaphors, respectively from the “Sonnets” and “Poem Written after September 11, 2001”) (see infra).
customary rights of access to gather plants, harvest trees, and take game.

[...]

But there is nothing really left to gather in Waikīkī. It is rare to see an endemic or indigenous plant. There are very few fish near its shores.

(Spahr, WTTN 109, 115-7)

In these cases the pictures help concretise and visualise the elements that are being criticized in the text. The accompanying images (also included in the appendix) illustrate a fenced area (p. 209), a small beach with a garbage can prominently in the centre of the picture (p. 215), two presumably indigenous plants behind a fence (p. 216) and a bench before a waterfront view with litter surrounding it (p. 217).

Even though these images are not professional photographs and come across as quickly made snapshots, they still provide a visual confirmation to what is being said in the text, thus strengthening the point the “I” is trying to make and granting the narrator with more trustworthiness. It is this combination of a personal approach and the visual confirmation, that allows for the critical message to come across more strongly and leave more of an impression on the readers, with the intention of inciting them to engage critically with the issues discussed in the essay.

Unlike Lerner, whose lyrical I at time takes on a different identity or presents different and contrasting aspects of himself, Spahr’s lyrical I is quite consistent in her treatment of specific issues and themes.

In addition to the methods I discussed above, the language Spahr uses also functions as a way via which the lyrical I can represent herself as firm, consistent and reliable. For instance, Spahr’s poetry exists almost primarily of declarative sentences
with a lot of period or full stops. This allows every statement to have a finality and completeness.

Additionally the lyrical I often uses repetition, at times of complete sentences, specific syntactic structure or words, and at others via anaphora or epistrophe. The repetition emphasizes the utterances and gives them more power. In the following excerpt from “December 1, 2002” from This Connection of Everyone with Lungs, the lyrical I consistently uses the anaphora “I speak of”:

When I speak of skin I speak of lighting candles to remember AIDS and the history of attacks in Kenya.

I speak of toxic fumes given off by plastic flooring in a burning nightclub in Caracas.

I speak of the forty-seven dead in Caracas.

And I speak of the four dead in Palestine.

And of the three dead in Israel.

I speak of those dead in other parts of the world who go unreported.

I speak of boundaries and connections, locals and globals, butterfly wings and hurricanes.

I speak of one hundred and fifty people sheltering at the Catholic Mission in the city of Man.

I speak of a diverted Ethiopian airliner, US attacks on Iraqi air defense sites, and warnings not to visit Yemen.

Here, where we are with our separate skins polished by sweetsmelling
soaps and the warm, clean water of our shower, we sit in
our room in the morning and the sounds of birds are outside our
windows and the sun shines. (Spahr, *CEL* 19-20, ll. 70-87)

Each “I speak of” is succeeded by an exceedingly negative element. The violence is
repeatedly brought to the attention of the reader and by increasing the violence, the
awareness is also increasing raised (cf. Brogan in Chisholm 121).

In order to avoid that the reader might get accustomed to the repetitive structure,
the lyrical I abruptly changes the structure and focus of the poem in line 84 (“Here,
where [...]”). Suddenly, the reader is confronted with a juxtaposition of the terrible, yet
remote violence with the safe home environment.

The effect of the repetition – which on itself reinforced the message with every
repetition – that is suddenly broken, gives the reader an uncanny feeling and a sense of
estrangement. Especially as the situation described in the last stanza is so positive, the
reader will regard it warily after having just read the other lines. It creates room for
questioning (cf. Chisholm 121).

Though there is a sudden shift, this does not have to imply that the “I” becomes
inconsistent. The entire collection, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*, revolves
around the idea that every human is connected and tries to come to terms with the
contrast of seemingly remote global issues and the personal living sphere (see also
section 2.2. and 3.2.).

The I constantly addresses the difficulties contemporary individuals are faced with in
regard to the local and the global, as is also apparent in the following excerpt from
“December 2, 2002”, the subsection that immediately succeeds “December 1, 2002”:
“Beloveds, our world is small and isolated. [...] Despite our isolation, there is no escape
from the news [...].” (Spahr, *CEL* 25, ll. 24; 28)
In both these instances, the “I” not only expresses herself to be caught in between isolation and a global network, but also how this confrontation can be startling and frightening. Where theorists like Szeman and Castells remarked how the world is increasingly constructed like a global network, the work of Spahr provides a rendition of how this network society is experienced.

Similar to the technique used in the excerpt from “December 1, 2002”, Spahr frequently lets her repetitions transform into enumerated facts or elements, mimicking the effect of a news reel. The most extensive in This Connection of Everyone with Lungs can be found in “February 15, 2003”:

Over eight million people marched on five continents against the mobilization.

[...]

City, Tegucigalpa, Anchorage, Arcata, Fresno, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose, Santa Monica, Vallejo, Portland, Santiago, Lima, Caracas, Chicago, Normal, Detroit, Lansing, Minneapolis, Las Vegas, Santa Fe, Austin, Salt Lake City, Bellingham, Seattle, Tacoma, Toronto, Raleigh, Philadelphia, Ottawa, Quebec, Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Quito, Montevideo, San Jose, San Juan, Havana, gathered. Even those on Antarctica gathered together. Even we on this small island gathered. Of course other things happened. Dolly the cloned sheep was killed yesterday owing to premature aging. A bomb exploded an Israeli tank and four were killed. Cardinal Etchegaray visited Saddam Hussein but neither would say what they discussed. Child protection campaigners called for the removal of Polanski’s *The Pianist* from the Oscars because of the fugitive director’s child sex conviction. But mainly people gathered. (Spahr, *CEL* 53-5, ll. 2-3; 12-41)

The highly extensive enumerations – i.e. the list of over 130 place names as well as the list of other events – evoke the idea of a news reel, covering every notable, recent event (cf. Mayer 44). The enumerations both emphasise the message, as well as transform the lyrical I into an all-seeing, all-knowing, objective source and therefore encourage the reader to put his or her trust in the persona.
A similar effect is achieved by the enumerations in the sections “Unnamed Dragonfly Species” and “Sonnets” in *Well Then There Now*. In the former, the lyrical I inserts a different animal species between each sentence. As the following passage shows, the species are all printed in bold and are listed in alphabetical order: “In November of the previous year a big piece of the Antarctic Pine Island glacier broke off. **Banded Sunfish** [...] All of/ this happened far away from them. **Black Tern** They had never even/ been near Antarctica. **Blanding’s Turtle**” (Spahr, *WTTN* 76, ll. 9-10; 17-9)

The poem deals with the ecological consequences of global warming and how people often turn a blind eye towards these issues because to them they seem remote and unimportant. The list, almost like a catalogue of animal species, really concretises the rich biodiversity.

Furthermore, the lyrical I once again shows her capability and precision via the extent of the catalogue as well as the alphabetical order. The “I” is accurate, knowledgeable, which stimulates the reader to trust the “I” as well as her message.

In the “Sonnets” section the lyrical I enumerates blood value parameters in the manner of a medical blood tests:

- alkaline phosphatase at 46 units per liter
- gamma-glutamy transpeptidase at 22 units per liter
- bilirubin total at 0.5 milligrams per deciliter
- high density lipoprotein at 52 milligrams per deciliter

(Spahr, *WTTN* 22, 4th sonnet, ll. 9-12)

---

12 “Sonnets” and “Unnamed Dragonfly Species” will be discussed in more detail in respectively section 1.2 and in section 3.2. (see infra).
13 See also section 3.2.
Whereas the previous examples were reminiscent of a news reel or an encyclopedia, this time the enumeration employs medical jargon. A jargon that is associated to meticulous analyses as well as to the trustworthy figure of the doctor.

Although the patients, and in this case the readers, might not understand the implications of the values, they put their trust in the informed doctor, whom they know does understand and will cure them if necessary.

In all of these instances, from “December 1, 2002” over “February 15, 2003” and “Unnamed Dragonfly Species” to “Sonnets”, the persona proceeds in a highly ordered way and shows herself knowledgeable and therefore trustworthy. The reader, via the often intimate nature of the works as well as via their all-encompassing style, is encouraged to connect and trust the lyrical I.

However, the lyrical I is not always strong. At times anxiety and angst seep into the lyric. For instance in section “December 2, 2002” from “Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003” (in This Connection of Everyone with Lungs):

[...] While we turned in the night
sleeping uneasily the world went on without us.

We live in our own time zone and there are only a small million of us in this time zone and the world as a result has a tendency to begin and end without us.

[...]
Beloveds, our world is small and isolated.

[...]
It makes me angry that how we live in our bed—full of connected loving and full of isolated sleep and dreaming also—has no
relevance to the rest of the world.

How can the power of our combination of intimacy and isolation have so little power outside the space of our bed?

Beloveds, the shuttle is set to return home and out the window of the shuttle one can see the earth.

“How massive the earth is; how minute the atmosphere,” one of the astronauts notes.

Beloveds, what do we do but keep breathing as best we can this minute atmosphere? (Spahr, CEL 24-6, ll. 1-5; 24; 37-47)

The lyrical I is afraid and asks herself the questions “what difference can I make in this huge world?” and “do my actions and struggles matter?” The persona is questioning her purpose in the world, realising that her actions and goals are relative when seen from a global perspective. In Nancy's terminology, she is doubting the viability of mondialisation. The lyrical I wants to be “world-forming” by connecting, yet is confronted with a sense of helplessness.

In her fear, she turns to the “beloveds” for comfort and support. In general, Spahr's persona is characterised by a reflexive attitude and an urge to raise awareness to global issues, here the lyrical I is more nihilistic. This is especially for the poem’s final lines, in which the lyrical I cynically remarks, arguably with a sense of guilt, that in the end it seems as if the only thing one can do is breathe and try to survive.

The poem shows a persona who, though shaken, still holds onto her connection with the “beloveds”, still holding onto the “we”, which is apparent in the last two lines. In contrast to what one finds in the theories of i.a. Nancy and Bauman, who believe the
contemporary individual is increasingly more self-centred and focused on the Being, Spahr’s persona does not withdraw into herself, turns to others and to the self-expression. The unit is the safe haven, when the beliefs are shaken.

2. The Lyrical I in Relation to Community and Connection to Others

2.1. Community and Connection in Lerner’s The Lichtenberg Figures and Mean Free Path

As I already discussed in section 1.1., Lerner problematizes the individual’s identity by representing it as fractured and interiorly conflicted. At the same time, his work tends to problematize relationships to others as well.

When looking at The Lichtenberg Figures, the stress mostly lies on problematic relationships with others, for instance in the collection’s opening poem:

The dark collects our empties, empties our ashtrays.

Did you mean “this could go on forever” in a good way?

Up in the fragrant rafter, moths seek out a finer dust.

Please feel free to cue or cut

the lights. Along the order of magnitudes, a glyph, portable, narrow — Damn. I’ve lost it. But its shadow. Cast

in the long run. As the dark touches us up. [...]

[...] Could this go

on forever in a good way? A brain left lace from age or lightning.

The chicken is a little dry and/or you’ve ruined my life. (Emphasis EDB; Lerner, LF 1, ll. 1-7; 12-4)
In this poem the lyrical I often remains quite vague. For one thing, the reader cannot be sure as to how the “I” and the “you” relate to each other. Similarly, it often remains unclear precisely what certain words refer to (those marked above in bold). The fact that the lyrical I often leaves out specifying elements, which are needed to grasp the meaning of the verses, implies that the “I” and the “you” know each other well and long enough to know what the lyrical I is talking about. At the same time, these blanks and vagueness exclude the reader from the conversation as it were and turn him or her into a passive onlooker or even an intruder.

As I already mentioned, the relationship between the “I” and “you” is never clearly demarcated. Therefore, especially as the lyrical I in general is quite vague, one could propose various possibilities as to the nature of their bond. One interpretation – the one I will focus on – is that the “you” is the lyrical I’s significant other. This interpretation is supported by for instance the seemingly domestic setting of the first half of the last verse line (“The chicken is a little dry”). Following this line of thought, the “this” then would stand for their relationship in general, with the lyrical I questioning the viability of the relationship, almost asking the “you”: “Is it a good thing that our relationship continues or goes on like this?”

The poem reflects on a relationship that in a way is past its prime. The imagery used for this is mostly connected to waste or an old, dusty place. There is not much left but “empties” (which refer to empty beer bottles), full ashtrays. Even the moths are said to move away to a better place. What remains is nothing steady or concrete, but merely their shared past, which is compared to a shadow that reaches far back in time.

The lyrical I here plays around with the different meanings of “to cast”, which on the one hand can refer to a shadow that appears, but also to the act of discarding something. With this latter meaning in mind, the lines become even more cynical, in the
end the relationship can easily be wiped away or broken off, it can be discarded, in the long run.

The lyrical I puts the responsibility in the hands of the “you”: “Please feel free to cue or cut/ the lights.” (ll. 4-5). If the other decides to cue the lights, the shadow and their joined past is confirmed and strengthened. However, the “you” can also decide to cut the lights, here letting the dark clean away their past (as in line 1).

The ending of the poem is quite cynical, as the lyrical I links the quite banal matter of dry chicken to his ruined life. The statement almost borders on absurdity, yet at the same time can be seen as caustic and sardonic, hurtful for the other. The poem is characterised by a reflexive attitude in regard to relationships and as it is the collection’s opening poem, it sets the tone for the rest of the collection.

Communication is often shown to be defective in Lerner’s work. A clear example of this is the thirty-eighth poem of the collection, which entirely revolves around miscommunication and flawed relationships:

“Is this seat taken?” I don’t understand the question.

“Was there ever any doubt?” Below the knees.

“Can you forgive me?” I hardly even know you.

“Does it have meat in it?” I’m not at liberty to say.

“Am I going to be OK?” Yes and no.

“How long was I asleep?” That remains to be seen.

“Have you met my mother?” I won’t dignify that with an answer.
“Do you love me?”

“Which would you prefer?” Long ago.

“Can you hear me?” In the pejorative sense.

“How do I know it’s really you?” Not exactly.

“Did you do the reading?” I do not love you.

“Swear on your life?” Swear on my life.

“Do you want me to leave?” Little by little. (Lerner, LF 38, ll. 1-14)

As often is the case with Lerner, this poem invites to be read in multiple ways. One interpretation is that the questions are asked by different people, but they can also be read as making up one conversation. In the latter case the evolution of the questions reflects the evolution of a relationship, which becomes more intimate as time passes. In either cases the communication between the receiver of the questions and those/the one asking them is highly flawed.

Since the first sentence of each verse line is in quotation marks, the utterance comes across as more indirect than the unmarked sentence that follows. Therefore, the reader is inclined to interpret the first half to be uttered by a persona and the latter half by the lyrical I, as it appears closer to the reader. When looking closer at the lyrical I, it becomes clear that throughout the poem it is he that is thwarting constructive conversation.

The persona at times is deliberately vague, for instance in lines 5-6 or line 11, where he only gives an evasive, puzzling reply: “Yes and no”, “That remains to be seen” or “Not exactly.” At other times he just refuses to give an answer, for instance in line 7: “I won’t dignify that with an answer.” Their relationship is characterised by their not really
understanding or knowing the other, for instance the “I don’t understand the question” in response to the relatively straightforward question “Is this seat taken?” in line 1, or the “I hardly even know you” to the other’s “Can you forgive me?” in line 3.

The problem culminates in line eight, in which the lyrical I replies with silence to the (perhaps most important) question: “Do you love me?”. There are two lines in the poem that can be interpreted as belated responses to this question, namely “Long ago” in the next line and “I do not love you” in line 12. These lines have the effect that they add a nuance to the relationship. When the partner asks the lyrical I “Do you love me?”, the lyrical I does not reply because he is uncertain and needs time to think. Therefore the answer to the question does come, but belatedly.

While he contemplates the question, the lyrical I first turns to the past, to a time when he used to certain of his feelings for the other, replying “Long ago.” An answer which can be read as “long ago, I did love you.” The lyrical I then comes to the conclusion that now, he no longer loves the other (line 12). And when the other then asks whether the persona wants him or her to leave, he replies with “Little by little.” (I.14) Signalling that there is some emotion and attachment left.

In the course of the poem, the lyrical I transforms from a cynical, harsh person to a more differentiated character. When he is facing his true emotions, the cynical facade partially breaks and shows the uncertain, more vulnerable person below.

This poem, like the first, shows the reflexive nature of contemporary relationships, there is (constant) re-evaluation: should this still go on or is it time to quit? The communication is flawed and so is their relationship. However, the poem also adds a nuance to i.a. Bauman’s and Nancy’s theories. On first sight, the lyrical I appears to be the cynical and self-centred individual that Bauman and Nancy focus on in their
theories. Yet, by the end of the poem the reader is more likely to see him as a vulnerable individual that hides behind the cynical facade, afraid to face his emotions.

Although Lerner’s work tends to problematize human relationships, the lyrical I does at times express the wish to be connected to others. This is the case in for instance the following excerpt, in which the lyrical I juxtaposes his or her own loneliness to wishing the reader to have connections to others:

Reader, may your death strictly adhere to recognized forms.
May someone place his lips on yours, shake you gently, call your name.
May someone interlace his fingers, lock his elbows, and compress your chest,
every two seconds, to the depth of one and one-half inches. In the dream,
I discover my body among the abandoned tracks of North Topeka.
[...] I can no longer distinguish
Between verb moods that indicate confidence and those that express uncertainty. (Lerner, LF6, ll. 7-12)

In this poem the lyrical I wishes the reader to have clarity (i.e. a definable death) and more importantly, to have someone to revive him or her. CPR movements (ll. 8-10) are life-giving and physically intimate, and can be said to reflect the lyrical I’s wish for intimacy and a connection to others, as if saying: “may there be someone who cares enough about you to revive you.”

Especially since this is what the lyrical I is lacking, as is apparent from ll. 10-1. The loneliness is especially poignant as there even is no other to discover the lyrical I’s body, only himself. The sense of community is further complicated by the indication of a failing language. The “I” cannot fully express himself in his language, language which,
according to Nancy, is the marker of the *being-with*. The *Being* wishes to belong to a bigger unit, but fails.

Seeing that in the previous examples the community was always represented as something problematic, it is interesting that *Mean Free Path* should be initiated with an elaborate dedication poem “[f]or Ariana” (Lerner, *MFP* 6, l. 53). Although this section is marked as “Dedication”, it cannot be called an ordinary dedication (which often is quite concise), but functions like a poem.

In the poem, Ariana – which also is the name of Ben Lerner’s wife in real life – is praised as being the lyrical I’s one true support:

> For I had overslept,
>   for I had dressed
>   in layers for the long
>   dream ahead, the recurring
>   dream of waking with
>   alternate endings
>   she’d walk me through.
>
> For Ariana.

> For Ari. (Lerner, *MFP* 6, ll. 46-54)

In contrast to the poems I discussed before, this poem does not problematize interpersonal relationships. Instead the other, Ariana, is the guide that supports the “I” through everything. The idea of love being a support and a recluse returns in the collection, for example in the following instances:

> Wait, I don’t want this to turn
>   Turn into a major novel. I want this to be
Composed entirely of edges, a little path
For Ari. All my teachers have been women
But not how you mean that. That’s why I speak
In a voice so soft it sounds like writing
Night writing. [...]

[...] I don’t know how else to say it
I mean without writing. Maybe if you let
The false starts stand, stand in for symbols
Near collapse, or let collapsing symbolize
The little clearing loving is. Maybe then (Lerner, MFP 42, ll. 1-7; 14-8)

There are three hundred sixty-two thousand
And that’s love. There are flecks of hope
Eight hundred eighty ways to read each stanza
[...]
I did not walk here all the way from prose
To make corrections in red pencil
I came here tonight to open you up
To interference heard as music (Lerner, MFP 43, ll. 10-12; 15-8)

In both cases love is represented as a sort of safe haven. The lyrical I expresses the wish to reach Ari, to reach the “you”, through poetry.

Communication in these excerpts is something dubious. On the one hand there is the lyrical I, who describes how love is the “collapsing” of symbols and how the stanzas’ interpretations are unsettled. Moreover, the lines come across as quite incoherent at times. On the other hand, there is a shared meaning between the two lovers, a
connection through the used language: they do understand one another, as is clear from ll. 3-4 of the first excerpt and l. 17 from the second excerpt.

In contrast to the poems from *The Lichtenberg Figures*, the being-with here supersedes the *Being*, be it on a micro-scale. Additionally, also in contrast to *The Lichtenberg Figures*, the relationship between the lovers here is characterised by acts of kindness, gentleness and openness, rather than reproaches and miscommunication.

For instance it is described how the lyrical I’s contact of with women softened his voice, there are the “flecks of hope”, his interference is no nuisance, but like music. This is in contrast to for example: “Could this go/ on forever in a good way? [...] / The chicken is a little dry and/or you’ve ruined my life.” (Lerner 1, ll. 12-4). It seems as though the lyrical I in *Mean Free Path* has acquired the connection, which the lyrical I of *The Lichtenberg Figures* searched for, but was unable to find.

Nevertheless, not all relationships in *Mean Free Path* are as successful as the one with Ariana. *Mean Free Path* does not solely feature the relationship between the “I” and a lover. This is because *Mean Free Path* is as much a love poem for Ariana as it is an elegy for a deceased friend of the lyrical I:

The pitch drops suddenly because the source
Passed away last night in Brooklyn
Hanged himself from the apex in the hope
Left a rent check, a letter in the hand
So faint it read like falling, evening
Of never reaching ground. The siren
[...]
Walks through me, opening me up
[...] This isn’t music

[...]

Where he takes closure into his own hands

We can’t enter. This is a holding pattern

This is the lethal suspension of a friend

From a low beam by ligature. [...] (Lerner, *MFP* 53, ll. 1-6; 8-9; 11-4)

The lyrical I here shows himself to be affected by the death of a friend. The sense of loss, panic and despair is linked to the shrill sound of a siren, which “walks through me, opening me up” (Lerner, *MFP* 53, l. 8). The suicide of the friend – more precisely, the suicide by hanging – evokes despair and powerlessness (cf. l. 12). These lines both show that the lyrical I – even when he often depicts connection and community as something flawed and malfunctioning – does get affected by others and mourns their loss, as well as reinforce the idea that human relationships are frail connections. He could not help the friend, their relationship did not offer the necessary support. This idea is reappears, slightly reformed, in the following passage:

I know it’s full of flowers, music, stars, but

But the pressures under which it fails

How it falls apart if read aloud, or **falls**

What we might call its physics

**Together like applause, a false totality**

Scales. The words are just there to confuse

The censors, like mock eyes on the wing

**Except for Ari. No energy is lost if they collide**

The censors inside me, and that’s love

**And that’s the elegy.** I know I am a felt
This is the form where my friend is buried
Effect of the things that I take personally

A gentle rippling across the social body (Bold emphasis EDB; Lerner, MFP 56, ll. 1-13)

The “I” wishes to bury his friend in words, in an elegy. Yet, this only results in a fake idyllic composition “full of flowers, music, stars” which falls apart when put under pressure or read aloud. The lyrical I evokes the idea of a funeral setting, during which a speaker breaks down when reading out loud to all the people gathered there.

The lyrical I revisits the elegy in an attempt to come to terms with his grief, to bury his grief in it. Yet, the form fails to soothe him as it only provides a “false totality”, which like applause in the end is little more than a temporary merging of separate sounds, and is quick to fall apart.

Moreover, his composed words are “like mock eyes on the wing”, as is the case with certain butterflies, it cannot fool a keen observer. A keen observer like for instance Ariana, who is the only one whom the lyrical I cannot fool and who sees through his attempts to hide his grief behind this elegy.

The poem expresses the contrast between personal grief for a loved one and the effect of a death within a larger community, in which it only creates a “gentle ripple” (l. 13). The death only slightly disturbs the social unit, whereas it shakes the lyrical I. The poem also challenges the notion of there being true shared meaning in a community. If the individual does not trust himself to express his raw emotions and uses language to misguide, rather than to connect, the idea of a community as a plane of sharing, shared meaning and being-with – as Nancy sees it – becomes impossible. True understanding and sharing in Mean Free Path is only possible on a micro-level, with a significant other. Outside of this dual unit, there is only “false totality”.

Community in *The Lichtenberg Figures* and *Mean Free Path* is a dubious thing. The lyrical I of *The Lichtenberg Figures* is shown as struggling to connect with others, e.g. “The chicken is a little dry and/or you’ve ruined my life.” (Lerner, *LF* 1, ll. 4-5; 14)

The only exception to the rule is Ariana in *Mean Free Path*, who is depicted as the only one who is truly connected to the “I” and seems to know him better than he knows himself: “The words are just there to confuse/ The censors, like mock eyes on the wing/ Except for Ari. [...]” (Lerner, *MFP* 56, ll. 6-8)

Nevertheless, for others “[t]he words are” still “just there to confuse”. When considering that, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, shared meaning is a prerequisite for a community, it can be said that the lyrical I (or lyrical Is) in Lerner’s work impede(s) the formation of a community, because he only expresses himself in a fragmented, disjointed way, not allowing a shared meaning on a larger scale. Lerner’s poetry questions communication, and is innovative and self-reflexive. An instance in which this is overtly present, is the following excerpt from *Mean Free Path*: “Look out/ The symbols are collapsing.” (Lerner, *MFP* 47, ll. 17-8). The lyrical I relativizes and reflects upon communication via language, its symbols being unstable.

At times the lyrical wittily mocks his own self-expression via lyric: “I wish all difficult poems were profound./ Honk if you wish all difficult poems were profound.” (Lerner, *LF* 23, 13-4) In this case, he questions how meaning is transferred via poetry. It is an amusing and ironic remark, considering Lerner’s own work problematizes shared meaning, self-expression and communication.

The problematic relationship to others can be explained by the floundering communication. As Nancy points out, language is the mechanism that allows for meaning
to be shared, thus linking the Beings to the being-with (cf. BSP 85-8). Without proper communication, the formation of a unit becomes problematic.

2.2. Community in Spahr’s This Connection of Everyone with Lungs and Well Then

There Now

In contrast to what can be found in Lerner’s works, Spahr cherishes the idea of an all-encompassing community. In the case of This Connection of Everyone with Lungs this idea is already infused in the title. The title is derived from the first poem of the collection, namely the “Poem Written after September 11, 2001”.

The first thing that is remarkable in this poem is that it contains only one personal pronoun, namely the one in the following line: “How connected we are with everyone.” (Emphasis EDB, Spahr, CEL 9, l. 95) By making the sole personal pronoun of the poem a “we”, the persona chooses to focus on the unit, the collective, rather than on the individual.

Secondly, Spahr establishes the sense of equality of all humans and even all beings by playing with the poem’s scope: from all-encompassing, to small, to all-encompassing. The first line provides an overview, like an all-seeing narrator looking down on the world: “These are the things:” (Spahr, CEL 3, l. 1). This line is highly general and implies that an enumeration of all existing things is about to follow, considering that there is a colon at the end of the line and seeing that “things” is preceded by a definite article (and not by a zero article, or an indefinite determiner like “some”) and that “things” is not modified.

Then Spahr zooms in and starts describing the elements and movements that take place within one organism (in ll. 2-7). The organism then becomes a basis to move beyond: “But outside of this shape is a space.” (Spahr, CEL 4, l. 8). Eventually, in line
twelve, the lyrical I remarks that this process of space existing outside the shape is the same for everyone, after which he or she starts describing the space as air that "goes in and out of everyone's bodies." (Spahr, CEL 4, l. 16)

The following stanzas focus on the air that "everyone with lungs breathes", again ever widening the scope step by step: from the air between hands over that between and around hands, over that of a room, etc. until she has reached the penultimate layer of Earth's atmosphere (cf. Spahr, CEL 4-8, ll. 17-79). These stanzas formally mimic the rhythm of breathing by the use of anaphora ("as everyone with lungs breathes"), epistorphe ("in and out"), the fact that there are neither full stops, nor capitals (symbolising equality, incessant movement), and because of them expanding as the poem flows on (mimicking expanding lungs).

After this the poem zooms in once more and connects the previous locative movement to the universality (both temporal and equal for all creatures with lungs) of this process: "In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out by everyone with lungs during all the moments." (Emphasis EDB; Spahr, CEL 8, ll. 80-1).

In the lines following, being lines 82 to 94, the poem's angle is reversed: from the mesosphere back to the hands. This again reinforces the idea of universality, the order or the perspective is arbitrary and does not change the fact that everyone is connected and shares the same air and space.

Additionally, in these lines, the mechanism is described as “entering in and out”:

Then all of it entering in and out.
The entering in and out of the space of the mesosphere in the entering in and out of the space of the stratosphere in the entering in and out of the space of the troposphere in the entering in and out of the space of the oceans in the entering in and out of the
space of the continents and islands in the entering in and out of
the space of the nations in the entering in and out of the space of
the regions in the entering in and out of the space of the cities in
the entering in and out of the space of the neighborhoods nearby
in the entering in and out of the space of the building in the
entering in and out of the space of the room in the entering in
and out of the space around the hands in the entering in and out
of the space between the hands. (Spahr, CEL 9, ll. 82-94)

Thus, the exhaling is not seen as a departure or an exit, but as an “entering out”, which
in itself is a contradiction. There is only the taking in: either of the space taken in by the
organism or the space from the organism taken in by the exterior space, which again
stresses the idea of sharing and collectivity. This idea is then explicitly expressed in the
next line: “How connected we are with everyone.” (Spahr, CEL 9, l. 95)

The theories of Jean-Luc Nancy can help understand the poem as a manifestation
of the being-with, seeing that the poem focuses on the importance of the collective. In
“Poem Written after September 11, 2001”, it is the sharing unit that is predominant. One
might think that one is a “shape” before anything else, yet, the lyrical I makes it quite
clear that this is not what is most important, for instance in l. 8, which directly succeeds
the description of the “shape”: “But outside of this shape is space.” (Spahr, CEL 4, l. 8)

However, in the remaining two stanzas of the poem the collectivity is shown as
something which is being threatened by violence and pollution. This is represented by
the lyrical I listing numerous materials such as “suspended dust spores”, “sulphur and
sulphuric acid”, “titanium and nickel and minute silicon particles from pulverized glass
and concrete.” (Spahr, CEL 9-10, ll. 98-101)
On the one hand this can be linked to modernization and globalization, yet at the same time can be interpreted as the debris that was scattered and inhaled by bystanders in the event of 9/11, after which the poem takes its title. These lines function as a preliminary to the poem’s concluding remark: “How lovely and how doomed this connection of everyone with/ lungs.” (Spahr, CEL 10, ll. 102-3). The connection that is “lovely” and natural is being threatened by harmful elements and, implicitly, by violence.

The lyrical I’s attitude can be understood better when one takes into account the theories of Nancy on the one hand and those of Beck, Giddens and Lash on the other hand. The persona expresses herself to desire a being-with and in the poem reminds the reader of the fact that in se everybody is connected.

At the same time, she expresses a reflexive attitude, seeing that she points out that localities are irrelevant: the local and the global are intertwined. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Spahr refers to the air as “space”, e.g. "This space goes in and out of everyone’s bodies.” (Spahr, CEL 4, l. 16) As Heather Milne remarks, the word “space” “powerfully denotes physicality, orientation, and contact.” (206) In other words, Spahr transforms location from a static into a dynamic element, stressing the connection between people as well as between the local and the global (cf. Milne 206).

Additionally, she contemplates the way modernization is changing – and threatening – the vital aspect of living, namely, being connected. By contrasting “lovely” and “doomed” in the final line of the poem, the lyrical I makes the reader aware of the fact that the desirable and important unit is being threatened by harmful elements and, implicitly, by violence.

In “Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003”, the second section of This Connection of Everyone with Lungs, Spahr elicits a strong sense of
community by using certain elements that are reminiscent of a diary or sent letters. This has the effect that it draws the reader in, as it assumes an intimate connection of writer and reader.

Firstly, there is the date that simultaneously functions as a title to each subsection, which is reminiscent of a date added to each journal entry or one written at the top of a letter (or e-mail). Secondy, there is the apostrophe which returns throughout the section: “Beloveds”. This term is reminiscent of formulas such as “dear diary”, which frequently initiate typical diary entries. It can also be read as a term of endearment one would use to address a lover or close friend in a letter or e-mail.

Both these elements function as “connecting devices” that allow the lyrical I to include all readers, and by extension everyone (cf. Milne 209). This is apparent in for instance the following excerpt: “Beloveds, yours skins are of all colors, are soft and wrinkled, / blotchy and reddish, full of blemish and smooth.” (Spahr CEL 23, ll. 62-3)

Remarkably, the lyrical I addresses her readers by means of a plural. The “Beloveds” reflects the sort of unit which Nancy refers to as a singular plural, seeing that the “I” unites all others, all readers, in one and the same apostrophe. Nancy’s theories are especially applicable to Spahr’s work, seeing that the persona constantly expresses the wish to connect with the beloveds in an intimate and personal way:

Some say thronging Warrior combat vehicles, some say foot soldiers,

others call a fleet the most beautiful of sights the dark earth offers.

[...]

But I say it’s whatever you love best.

---

14 Similar to the essays “Dole Street” and “2199 Kalia Street” in Well Then There Now, which via different techniques also evoke the form of a journal.
It’s what one loves, the most beautiful is whomever one loves.

I say it is whatsoever a person loves.

I say for me it is my beloveds.

For me naught else, it is my beloveds, it is the loveliest sight. (Spahr CEL 45-7, ll. 13-4; 27; 32-35)

In the above passage, the love for the others in the being-with prevails of the love for the self. In this regard, Sophie Mayer refers to Spahr’s lyrical I as a “dispersed” and “disrupted” I who favours the collective over the sole individual voice (cf. 47; 50-3).

Now, although Spahr does indeed dedicate herself to spreading a message that aims to connect, the individual self-expression still is a prevailing goal. This is apparent in for instance the following lines: “Beloveds, this poem is an attempt to speak with the calmness of/ the world seen from space and to forget the details. [...] An attempt to speak away.” (Spahr, CEL 35-6; ll. 26-7; 36)

It is interesting how in Spahr’s work the individual does not have to disappear into the unit, in contrast the “I” can still be herself within the unit, as a self-expressing individual. In this aspect, Spahr’s worldview contradicts that of Bauman and Beck, who believe the increasing individualization of the world are detrimental for the community and relationships to others (cf. Bauman, LM 135-6; cf. Beck 36). The individual does not have to make way for the collective, nor should the collective have to yield for the individual. Spahr, sees the collective as a co-existence, in which there is both room for the individual and the being-with.
As I discussed in the previous section, Lerner’s *Mean Free Path* focuses on the traditional couple, a dual unit, as providing comfort to the individual. In contrast, Spahr’s persona addresses and wishes to connect with a bigger unit.

In addition to the apostrophe “beloveds” and the pronoun “we”, Spahr also uses – what Heather Milne terms – the “unconventional pronouns” “yous” and “yours” (204). For instance: “I want to tie everything up when I speak of *yous*./ I want to tie it all up and tie up the world in an attempt to under-/stand the swirls of patterns.” (Emphasis EDB; Spahr, *CEL* 32, ll. 27-29)

Like “beloveds”, these forms “pluralize her addressee” and allow the persona to address both the single reader and the collective in one form (Milne 204). Spahr defies the rules of grammar to create a form in which the others are collected, but which still allows plurality or, in other words, diversity. Although Spahr wishes to connect and form a *being-with*, she does not aim to compress everyone into a *singular plural* (cf. *BSP* 30-35; 76). Spahr, via her lyric language, is able to project a worldview that is focussed on communion, but which does not lose sight of the individual’s voice.

Lastly, as I already mentioned above, Spahr also connects with the reader via the pronoun “we”. In the first section of *Well Then There Now*, “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours”, consistently uses the “we” as dominant pronoun, which constantly iterates the focus on unity that resounds in the poem:

*Some of we were to settle. Some of we were to arrange. And the land was never ours. [...]*

*We are all in this world, this world of hands and grain, together. Some of us are sparrows pecking at our hand. Some among us are sparrows picotant*
with our hand. Flying then nesting on our finger. [...]

Some of we are pecking back. [...]

Some of we are flying at our hand, flying at our hand. Some of we let ourselves fly to our hand, rollings up with our hand. Some of we are pecking at our hand of flying.

[...] To we are all

in this world together. We all the small ones are together in this world. [...] To change. To change. To make the change. [...] To embrace, to not settle. To embrace, not to arrange. To speak. To speak. [...] To poke a way at what it is that is wrong in this world we are all in together. To push far what is with it is incorrect in this world which all the small ones are us in the unit. (Spahr, *WTTN* 12-4, ll. 34-5; 48-50; 59; 63-5; 71-3; 75; 82-6)

Though “we” is a form that compresses the unit more than the plural “yous”, one finds that here too the diversity remains. The lyrical I points out that even though people might not all be similar or alike, and might act differently (“Some of we”), in the end “[w]e all the small ones are together in this/world”, “in the unit”. There is no need to conform and become one singular plural.

The poem expresses the idea that people should embrace the “we”, embrace the land and try to change the world for the better instead of trying to selfishly possess it. Interestingly, Spahr here to refers to speaking as a way to connect and bond. The lyrical I expresses a similar need for language to create the unit, as Nancy did in regard to the
being-with.\textsuperscript{15} Even though Spahr’s worldview diverges from Nancy’s in regard to the singular plural, she too emphasizes the importance of shared meaning and communication for the existence of a collective (cf. Nancy, BSP 2).

In the “Sonnets” section from Well Then There Now, the persona uses blood as a metaphor to stress the connection between people.\textsuperscript{16} Sonnets three, five, seven and nine are juxtaposed or mirrored with sonnets (respectively sonnets two, four, six and eight) consisting of an enumeration of blood value parameters.\textsuperscript{17}

Humans are complex creatures: each has an own identity and each a different life project (to use Bauman’s terminology). As the lyrical I states in the third sonnet: “We with all our complexities./ We with all our identifications./ We with all our homes and our irregularities live.” (Spahr, WTTN 21, ll. 2-4)

Thus the lyrical I acknowledges that the “we” consists of differences. However, these differences do not prevent the unit from existing, as there are more important forces that connect, blood for instance: “Blood is a force, a house.” (Spahr, WTTN; fifth sonnet; 23, l. 9)

Spahr does not use blood as a divider – as are for instance concepts as racial or blood purity that featured in the fascist philosophy – but evokes the idea of blood as a uniting force: it is a house that accommodates us all. All humans, all parts of the “we”, have blood running through their veins. Like blood that runs through the circuit of veins, it also flows through the unit.

\textsuperscript{15} I discuss the use of language in this poem in more detail in section 3.2.1.
\textsuperscript{16} Similar to the metaphor of breathing in “Poem Written after September 11, 2001” in which everyone is connected because all breathe the same air.
\textsuperscript{17} I added an illustrative scan of two of these mirrored sonnets in the appendix.
The different parameters named in sonnets two, four, six and eight together form – what the persona refers to as – a “catalogue” of blood:

A catalogue of the individual and a catalogue of us with all.

[...]

A catalogue of blood.

A catalogue of us with all our complexities.

A catalogue of how we are all full of thought and connection.

[...]

The house of difference when we look.

The house of norms and abnormalities and their percentages. (Spahr, WTTN; seventh sonnet; 25, ll. 1; 4-6; 13-4)

The specific assembly of one person’s blood may make that person unique in one aspect, yet he or she remains a variation within the unit (with all its possible combinations). Society and being-with here is presented as a house, in which all humans live, those that fit the norm as well as those that do not, everyone is connected.

Spahr reinvents a metaphor that often is used in a negative way, i.e. to divide one group from another, evoking concepts such as “blood purity” or the highly selective “blood ties”. On the other hand, the “blood ties” also evoke a sense of family connection, a bond you cannot erase. Undeniably, all humans have blood running through their veins, regardless of the composition and it is this connection everyone shares, that Spahr focuses on.

In addition to inciting the reader to connect to others, the lyrical I also warns the readers for a false sense of connection:

I speak of our morning to come, mundane with the news of it all,
with its hour of feeding, preening, and **restrained socializing**

before turning to our **separate computers and the wideness of**

**their connections** [...].

[...] I speak of those who

**encourage us to think of them** as roosting with us, Mariah Carey,

Jermaine Dupri, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, Jay-Z, Cam’ron,

Justin Timberlake, Nick Carter, Rod Stewart, and Shania Twain. (Spahr, *CEL* 17, ll. 40-43; 48-51)

The real-life contact with other is “restrained”, whereas the “separate computers” give

the users a false sense of connection. Popular figures make people believe they are

connected to them, yet this too is false. What people really should strive for is a genuine,

profound unit with others, a unit that is “world-forming” and struggles against injustice

and global ecological problems together [like what was expressed in “Some of We and

the Land That Was Never Ours” of *Well Then There Now* (see supra)].

To Spahr the “connection of everyone with lungs” is a mechanism that allows

individuals to become strong, or as Mayer puts it: “An interpersonal relationship can

enlarge the self to include not only the “beloveds” (in Spahr’s term) but the global

population as individuals and as an interrelated whole.” (44)

### 3. Modernity and Politics

#### 3.1. Modernity, Technology and Politics in the Works by Ben Lerner

The fact that Ben Lerner has a bachelor degree in political theory indicates his interest in

contemporary politics and ecology. An instance in which his concern with contemporary

politics and ecology rises to the surface is for example the following excerpt from an
interview and conversation with Aaron Kunin, who also is a contemporary American poet. Here, Lerner states that things aren’t going well for our empire, our species, or our planet. Who, besides politicians or the insane, would deny that our commitment to radical ecological destruction and the ever-increasing proliferation of murderous technologies threaten the survival not only of our culture, whatever that might be, but of culture generally? (Kunin and Lerner, 240)

Lerner here openly comments on the contemporary global situation, general in a way that is similar to what Beck, Giddens and Lash refer to this as reflexive modernization. He specifically reflects upon and criticizes the way humanity deals with ecology and technology. Additionally, he reflects on contemporary culture in general. The appositive “whatever that might be” to “our culture” signals doubt and even cynicism, respectively questioning whether there is any homogeneity and whether such a destructive culture can even be called a culture at all?

In his poetry, one finds a similar attitude. The lyrical I is often wary in regard to how contemporary individuals react to issues such as ecology, technology and politics. War and violence, for instance, play an important role within his works, though at times the references are more indirect and inconspicuous.

An example of this is for instance the cover illustration to Mean Free Path (illustration in the appendix), which at first sight appears to be quite innocent. One only sees some light rays break through the clouds and casting their light on the Earth. However, the back cover reveals that the illustration of U.S. Peacekeeper III re-entry vehicles, which in fact are ballistic missiles. Each line is the path of one of the warheads.
In *Mean Free Path* it is the cover illustration that first warns the reader to engage critically with the work, as there is more to it than meets the eye.

At the same time the cover illustration can also be said to emphasize how the world is disintegrating and disembedding. The illustration displays how difficult it nowadays can be to distinguish destructive from productive forces, technology from nature, or important from banal elements. At first sight one is not able to spot the true nature of the illustration and one easily mistakes the re-entry vehicles as rays of sunlight.

From Nancy's point of view, this phenomena could be explained by the fact that *globalization* has transformed the world into a disintegrated, megapolitical world. Politics and technology are everywhere, yet are not always clearly identifiable (cf. Nancy, *CWG* 33-4).

At times, the disintegrating effects of *globalization* manifest themselves in the lyrical I's inability to distinguish violence from banality. For instance, in the following poem from *The Lichtenberg Figures*, the lyrical I is shown as somebody to whom violence and banality almost blend together:

I had meant to apologize in advance.

I had meant to jettison all dogmatism in theory and all sclerosis in organization.

I had meant to place my hand in a position to receive the sun.

I imagined such a gesture would amount to batter, battery. A cookie

is not the only substance that receives the shape

of the instrument with which it’s cut. The man-child tucks

a flare gun into his sweatpants and sets out
for a bench of great beauty and peacefulness.

[...]

My cowardice may or may not have a concrete economic foundation.

I beat Orlando Duran with a ratchet till he bled from his eye.

I like it when you cut the crust off my sandwiches.

The name of our state flower changes as it dries. (Emphasis EDB; Lerner, LF 2, 1-8; 10-4)

This poem – as most poems in The Lichtenberg Figures – has the flow of a train of thought, like the narrative mode of the stream-of-consciousness. This is most clearly evident in lines four to six, in which the train of thought moves from batter, over battery, to a cookie (via batter, i.e. cookie batter).

The poem itself additionally provides an account of how the lyrical I changed and developed: which is reflected by the lyrical I’s use of verb tenses (from past perfect over past simple to present simple) and is suggested by the poem’s last line: “The name of our state flower changes as it dries.” (l. 14) He, like the flower, changes as he grows older.

In the beginning of the poem, the persona lists what he “had meant” to do but, as the “had meant to” suggests, failed to do. In these first three lines, he admits how he wanted “to jettison all dogmatism in theory and all sclerosis in organization.” (Lerner, LF 2, l. 2) The “I” expresses having had a wish to learn to think for himself and go against the hardening of “organization”. Additionally, he wished to be more closely connected to nature, literally opening up his hand to receive sunlight.

With the tense change from past perfect to past simple, thus moving closer to the present, violence makes his entry in the poem: “battery” (l. 4). When the poem then

---

18Sclerosis is the hardening of (organic) tissue.
shifts to the simple present, the content becomes increasingly violent, for instance the
associations with warfare (ll. 6-8) and violence (e.g. l. 12).

However, the lyrical I is not particularly shaken by the violence, in contrast, he is
quite indifferent to it. This is apparent from the manner with which he seemingly
effortlessly links innocent things to violent elements. This is for instance the case with
“batter, battery” vs. “[a] cookie (l. 4), in which the violence literally flows over into the
banal by means of association, “[t]he man-child” with his “flare gun” vs. “the girl my
neighbors sent to Catholic school” (ll. 6-7; 9-10), or “I beat Orlando Duran” vs. “I like it
when you cut the crust of my sandwiches” (ll. 12-3)

In this poem, globalization theories can aid in the understanding of the poem and
the persona’s behaviour. For instance, the poem is marked by what Beck, Giddens and
Lash refer to as reflexive modernization: the individual, because of globalization, is
increasingly exposed to and aware of violence and injustice. Not just in his own local
environment, but also on a global scale (cf. Beck et al. x-xiv).

At first he is affected by guilt caused by this knowledge, which Beck et al. see as a
natural result of reflexive modernization (cf. Beck et al. x-xiv). The sense of guilt is
apparent in for instance the first line: “I had meant to apologize in advance.” (l. 1)

Line four marks a shift in the lyrical I’s mentality, as he contemplated the
elements he believed in up to that point (ll. 1-3), he comes to the conclusion that they
“would amount to batter, battery.” (l. 4) In other words, when looking through the lens
of Bauman’s theories, the lyrical I can be said to have discarded his old solids. He does
not want to be bound to anything that might be disadvantageous for himself (cf.
Bauman, LM 1-8; cf. IS 11-2).

However, there are no new solids to replace the old ones and one finds that the
lyrical I grows more indifferent to violence. Globalization theories can help account for
this indifference. Nancy sees indifference as a reaction of the individual to the lack of certainties and relativity in the globalized world (cf. CWG 33-5). At a certain moment, the lyrical I realised that his intentions were useless and would only injure himself (as shown in l. 4). In order to avoid desperation – seeing that there are no more securities – he starts shielding himself against the violence and begins to treat it in the same manner as he deals with banal matters.

The following excerpt of *Mean Free Path* expresses a similar idea of an individual incapable of acting in regard to global matters. Here the lyrical I reflects on issues such as war and battle and directly contrasts these to the potential of contemporary technology:

```
  warming, we can enter
      our address, they rotate
  slowly overhead, the satellites,
I imply their passing when
you’re reading, do you think
I wanted it to end

    in complicated paths
like minor planets, flowering trees
    or villages
aflame, please find
    you seat, pretend
to be asleep, then am, head against
the shade, or writing in
a minute hand, yellow masks, unless
```
Small children travelling alone
    there is a screen
or solders, so many dots per inch
    The uniform
becomes you

Seen from space
it hasn’t happened yet, the states
I’m quoting from at night
are red. If they assign storms
proper names, why can’t I
    Describe the structure of
feel anything, I mean without
    visuals (Emphasis EDB; Lerner, MFP 61, ll. 1-27)

A lot is going on in this poem. Unlike many of Lerner’s other poems, this poem has a specific setting, its backdrop being a plane (apparent from e.g. ll. 10-3). This location itself is already significant, being a mass transportation device, that allows the global to become as accessible as the local. Additionally, it is an environment in which the persona finds himself surrounded by technology. Both the transportation and the technology are elements that intertwine the local and the global (cf. Szeman 209; Szeman 213).

The term reflexive modernization, coined by Beck, Giddens and Lash, allows a better insight into the lyrical I’s feelings. In the face of the technical accomplishments and knowledge of both global and local events that reaches him, the lyrical I feels incapable and helpless. Humans have the ability to access to an unlimited amount of
information, they can travel anywhere, etc., yet, the individual is here represented as helpless in the face of global disasters (for instance in ll. 17-8 and ll. 21-7).

Unlike Spahr, who, as I will discuss in the next subsection, is quite specific when mentioning political events and whose reflexive attitude is often openly expressed, Lerner remains vague and keeps the descriptions quite general. For example, the poem could refer to almost any attack on a village (ll. 9-10) or any mobilisation of forces (ll. 17-23).

Yet, this approach has its own merits. The lyrical I could be anybody, the problems could be happening anywhere. In contrast to the language Lerner uses, which complicates a connection to the poetry, this can be said to promote sympathy and understanding. The reader will be inclined to engage with the poem and recall events that are similar.

In this poem, the lyrical I’s relationship to technology is double. On the one hand, technology is shown as a useful, practical addition to everyday life: it allows people to travel, to obtain knowledge, etc. However, at the same time, the lyrical I expresses a wariness in regard to technology and for the dissociating effects of technology, for instance the satellites and screens allow us to know what is happening on this planet, yet also mediate the events and make them more remote. For instance, in lines 16-8, the soldiers are objectified and reduced to “dots per inch”.

Additionally, the lyrical I expresses how much he relies on technology, especially for interpreting and comprehending the world: “[...] why can’t I/ Describe the structure of/ feel anything, I mean without/ visuals” (ll. 24-7) The visuals, accessible via technological devices such as the screen in line 16, are necessary in order to understand anything. In these lines Lerner points out how technology has not only affected everyday
life and the world’s structure, as for is discussed by i.a. Castells and Nancy, but also how technology influences the individual’s way of thinking and how he or she interprets the world.

A similar idea is expressed in the following excerpt: “At thirteen, I had a series/ of dreams I can’t remember [...] / No additional media available.” (Lerner LF 7, ll. 8-9;14) This poem in a way indicates how modern humans rely on technology to remember. One can look up everything that one has forgotten, except for personal memories. Nothing can aid us with that and here one is left relying purely on one’s own mind.

At the same time, these lines in which the brain (memorising capabilities) are compared to a computer. As if the lyrical I is browsing through his or her own mind as though it were a computerised database. In this case as well as in the previously discussed poem, Lerner reflects on how technology and technological lingo has crept into everyday speech and how our thinking process is affected by our constant use of technology. Contemporary humans have become used to relying on technology as a way to inform themselves and remember.

In these, it is the poetry that functions as an addition to the theories, as it provides a subjective, personal insight in how an individual reflects upon his mind and thinking process.

In addition to problematizing contemporary humans’ attitude towards violence and technology, Lerner at times also focuses on the hectic nature of contemporary life. This is for instance the case in the following extract from The Lichtenberg Figures, in which the lyrical I is confronted with the immense speed of contemporary, everyday life:

King of Beers, King of Pop, King of Kings;

proud sponsor of rain dance [...];
moviegoer, meat eater, Republican: bless

my girlfriend, bless each chicken finger, the commute
to Brooklyn, watch over her hard drive and suspicious mole,
forget her smoking, protect her from anthrax
and obesity, Scud and Rohypnol. If she is groped at a bar,

[...] send a plague through nicotine patch
and cell phone [...] 

[...] Destroy

with fire, short sword, and sulphur. Destroy me. Then destroy her.

(Emphasis EDB; Lerner, LF 39, ll. 1-2; 4-10; 12-4)

In the poem, Lerner ironically adapts a prayer to contemporary standards. Words and elements that typically belong to a prayer – such as “bless”, “watch over”, “forget her”, “protect her”, and the evocation of the punishing, wrathful Catholic and/or Jewish God of the Old Testament in line 9 – are combined with elements that are linked to pop culture and consumption.

The elements from contemporary pop culture are both neutral e.g. sponsorship, commuting, technological devices etc. as well as to some more negative inventions and consequences of modernity, such as anthrax (often associated with biological weapons), missiles (Scud), Rohyptnol (a sedative which is also called the date rape drug, often used by sexual violence perpetrators), etc.

The quick succession of different elements resembles a high-paced, chaotic stream-of-consciousness of the lyrical I and stresses how contemporary life, as Nancy remarked, is hectic and disintegrated (cf. CWG 33-4). The fact that the poem resembles a prayer can be interpreted by looking at the poem via the lens of Bauman’s theories.
From this point of view, one can interpret the lyrical I’s behaviour as an attempt to re-embed and look for a new solid in a seemingly hectic, disintegrated world.

In his search for certainty, he wishes to transform everyday banality, hectic and contemporary culture in general into his new solid. This is for instance clearly visible in his evocation of a modern holy trinity: “King of Beers, King of Pop, King of Kings” (l. 1), which respectively refer to a slogan for Budweiser beer, to the singer Michael Jackson and a 1961 biblical epic film about the life of Jesus.

However, his attempt is unsuccessful, he finds no peace and remains on the run, which in the poem is reflected by the quick succession of elements. By the very end of the poem, he realises that there will be no rest to be found, and similar to the fourth poem of The Lichtenberg Figures, which I discusses in subsection 1.1., the only certainty that remains is the inevitability of mortality, which no one can escape (ll. 12-4).

In the previous paragraphs I already discussed how Lerner at times problematizes human dependence on technology (e.g. in the lines: “[W]hy can’t I/ Describe the structure of/ feel anything, I mean without/ visuals (Lerner, MFP 61, ll. 24-7). Similarly, in the following excerpt, one finds that contemporary elements has started to blend with age-old nature:

Darling, my favorite natural abstraction is a tree
so every time you see one from the highway
remember the ablative case in which I keep
your tilde. (A scythe of moon divides
the cloud. The story regains its upward sweep.)
O slender spadix projecting from a narrow spathe,
you are thinner than spaghetti but not as thin as vermicelli.
These lines are taken from the fourth poem of *The Lichtenberg Figures*, which I already discussed in my analysis of the identity of the lyrical I. The first six lines of the poem deal with the lyrical I's identity (“What am I the antecedent of?”), but after the first sestet, the poem's topic branches off into a different direction, as if some thought triggered a new train of thought of the lyrical I.

From the apostrophe (“Darling”, a term of endearment) onwards, a lot of semantic fields are mixed and rapidly succeed one another: nature (“tree”, “moon”, “spadix”, “spathe”), human-made objects and technology (“highway”, “scythe”, “Nintendo”), mathematical (“tilde”, which in this interpretation is a mathematical symbol for equivalence), linguistic (“ablative case”, “tilde”, which in this interpretation marks a change of pronunciation) and even culinary (“spaghetti”, “vermicelli”). There is a contrast between the vagueness in regard to the identity of the addressed and the highly specific terminology used in the metaphors.

At first this miscellaneous chain speeds up the reading process, as the reader is inclined to search for binding elements within the chaos. But at the same time, the chaos and the at first sight haphazardly combined elements also obligate the reader to reread and make associations to link the different verses.

However, the most striking combination the lyrical I makes in regard to the different semantic fields, is the blend of nature and technology. For instance, when the persona links trees to highways, “Darling, my favorite natural abstraction is a tree/ so every time you see one from the highway” (ll. 7-8), the persona shows how nowadays there no longer is a dividing line between nature and technology. In a sense, the highway
has become even more commonplace to the “I”, than the tree. This because the “every time you see one” makes the tree-spotting more of an occasional thing.

Another interesting blend can be found in the poem’s final lines: “O slender spadix projecting from a narrow spathe,/ you are thinner than spaghetti but not as thin as vermicelli./ You are the first and last indigenous Nintendo.” (ll. 12-4) Interestingly, the lyrical I here connects a specific part of certain flowers to a Nintendo, a gaming console.19 By linking the natural element to the entertainment device, the reader can infer how nature to the lyrical I functions as a game. Nature can be just as fascinating and entertaining as a gaming console.

Moreover, the persona addresses the spadix in a way that is reminiscent of an ode because of the use of the apostrophe “O slender spadix”. By expressing himself thus, the lyrical I conveys his admiration and fascination for this element of nature. However, it is remarkable that he expresses his admiration for nature by means of such specific, scientific terms and by means of a simile to a “Nintendo”. This shows just how predominant scientific knowledge and technology have become in contemporary life.

In this poem, the insertion of technology serves two main purposes. On the one hand it can be said that Lerner reinvents the ode by contemporising it and innovating it by means of inserting specific and technological terminology. On the other hand, it also marks how in contemporary life technology has become thus integrated in everyday life, that it can serve as a comparing plain for natural elements.

However, the final line of the poem also offers a critical reflection on technology: “You are the first and last indigenous Nintendo.” (l. 14) This fascinating element of nature is both the first and the last native, autochthonous form of entertainment. Nature

---

19 A spadix and a spathe (see illustration in the appendix) are the two major elements of flowers like the calla lily, respectively resembling a spike and a sheath.
was the starting point and is suggested to be the last. This can be interpreted in two ways: either it means that nature will outlive technology, or it can imply that contemporary humans will get/are getting bored of technology and will turn/are turning back to nature to be entertained and fascinated.

Lerner reflects upon the future of the world and looks beyond modernization as we know it. Additionally, in a very subtle way, he invites the readers to reflect on the relationship they have with nature and technology.

3.2. Politics, Technology and Ecology in the Works of Juliana Spahr

3.2.1. Technology as an Aid to Create Context and Meaning

In *Well Then There Now* Spahr constantly plays around with knowledge, of which it often is explicitly stated that is was obtained via the internet. A first example can be found before each section of the collection. These sections, aside from having a title, are always preceded by a location marked on a gray-scale coloured map and a highly specific set of geographic coordinates. By adding the coordinates to the poem, she lets the reader in on the context and setting in which she wrote the poem or at least that setting in which the reader should place the poem.

But technology does not feature solely as a means of creating context, since Spahr at times actively makes use of it in order to generate content. This is the case in for instance the poem “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours.” At the end of this first poem in the *Well Then There Now* there is an added note in which Spahr states the following: “I was just trying to figure out this day. I came home and used a translation machine to push my notes back and forth between French and English until a different sort of English came out: this poem.” *(WTTN 15)*
In other words, the translation machine helped to express herself in an innovating, new way, one across language boundaries. By using the translation machine, she was able to cross language boundaries, which allowed her to create a new hybrid language. It was technology that allowed Spahr to test the boundaries of communication and self-expression. From the perspective of Nancy’s theories, the hybrid language Spahr created can be interpreted as a manifestation of being-with. The technology allowed Spahr to create a new language that is shared between her and the reader, creating a connection and a “we”.

This “different sort of English”, as Spahr refers to it, can come across as a little strange at first. Yet the reader can still understand the gist of the message, namely that one should embrace the collective, the unit.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, considering the alienating effect of this hybrid language, the reader is even more encouraged to really contemplate the message and human communication.

The poem proves that meaning can be shared and communication can exist, even when the speakers speak a (slightly) different language. Spahr proves that technology does not necessarily have to be bad and that her poetry, the community and technology do not have to juxtapose one another. Quite contrarily, the combination can result in a rich melting pot.

There is no disintegration in this poem, but amalgamation. Though there are instances, as I will discuss below, in which Spahr shows a more negative outlook on technological devices, here it is a productive force. This can be explained when interpreting the poem from the perspective of Nancy’s theories, i.e. one can interpret the poem as a product of mondialisation. This because Spahr here uses technological devices

\textsuperscript{20} See also section 2.2. in which I also analyse this particular poem on the portrayal of the community and collective.
and communication in a productive, creative manner. She wishes to counter the disintegrating effects of globalization by creatively engaging with the matter and using elements, like technology, that normally provoke fragmentation.

In “Unnamed Dragonfly Species” (from Well Then There Now) the information made accessible via the internet also plays a highly important role in creating meaning. The poem (see also the following subsection, in which I discuss the poem in more detail) explicitly contains references to the internet as a source of information – vital to the poem:

They heard about all this cracking and breaking away on the news and then they began to search of the internet for information on what was going on. Blue Whale On the internet they found an animation of the piece of the Antarctic Pine Island glacier breaking off. […] On the internet they realized that Iceland’s Vatnajokull glacier is melting by about three feet a year. Common Loon That the Bering Glacier in Alaska recently lost as much as seven and a half miles in a sixty day period. (Spahr, WTTN 77-8, ll. 22-4; 37-40)

This excerpt shows how quickly and readily people (“they”) turn to the internet to remedy their confusion, often without critically reflecting on the information found on the internet. Like the collection’s first section, “Some of We and the Land That Was Never Ours”, Spahr incites the reader to engage critically with media and technology. It can provide a lot of information, but one has to use it wisely. For instance, the lyrical I displays the contrast between her own use of encyclopaedic knowledge, i.e. the various
animal species, to display the ecological diversity, and the “they” who naively absorb everything “they” find on the internet.

It is interesting how the lyrical I here uses “they” whereas she otherwise emphasizes the all-encompassing unit of the “we”. On the one hand it further stimulates the reader to do contemplate information, they are the “we”, not the “they”. As in “we” are not like “them”.

On the other hand, it could be interpreted as a moment of “we”-“them” thinking, but considering the fact that the lyrical I consistently strives for a strong collective, I believe it is more complex than that. A credible explanation would be that the use of the “they” reflects how the “unit” is still a work in process.

In both This Connection of Everyone with Lungs and Well Then There Now the lyrical I expresses the desires to form an all-embracing unit, it is a goal she strives for. The persona, in both collections, realises that it is not yet achieved, which is apparent in for instance the following lines: “I speak of how I cannot understand our insistence on separations/ and how these separations have nothing and everything to do with/ the moments when we feel joined and separated from each others.” (Spahr, CEL 21, 34-6)

In this aspect, Spahr’s poetry can be read as an expression of the wish to reach this all-encompassing unit, by means of informing the reader and urging the reader to reflect critically on the world. In contrast to the globalization theorists I discussed in the first chapter, Spahr’s poetry does not show an indifferent, selfish and cynical persona. There are moments of doubt (as discussed in section 1.2.), however, the persona always allows herself to trust others and to allow the being-with to be a healing experience. Spahr’s work shows how there are multiple possible reactions to reflexive modernization and globalization.
In the subsection “January 28, 2003” (from the “Poem Written from November 30, 2002, to March 27, 2003” in *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*) the lyrical I criticizes the fact that technology can also have a numbing as well as a disorienting effect on people. It has become part of mundane life, yet has the capacity to overwhelm us with information and news in such a manner that it almost becomes too much to bare:

Nothing makes any sense today beloveds.

I wake up to a beautiful, clear day.

A slight breeze blows off the Pacific.

It is morning and it is amazing in its simple morningness.

[...]

Amid ignorant armies and darkling plains, the news has momentarily stopped trying to make sense and the stories appear with a doubleness.

Israel said [...]

Palestine claims [...] 

Palestine claims [...] 

Israel claims [...] 

How can we be true to one another with histories of place so deep, so layered we can’t begin to sort through it here in the middle of the Pacific with its own deep unsortable history?

[...] 

It wasn’t just our history of place but the contradiction of the US taking unilateral military action to rid Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction that entered our two small rooms and we just wanted to leave and get on with the day’s mundane...
photocopies and desk chairs and telephones.

[...]

Today on the radio, Christie Brinkley exists and her worries about Billy Joel’s driving abilities exist.

[...]

U2 spy planes exist flying over the Koreas.

Supermodel Gisele Bundchen’s plan to eradicate hunger in Brazil exists.

Heart disease in women exists.

[...]

The world goes on and on, spins tighter and then looser on a wobbling axis, and it has a list of adjectives to describe it, such as various and beautiful and new, but neither light, nor certitude, nor peace exist. (Spahr, CEL 48-52, ll. 8-11; 15-23; 31-3; 36-40; 43-4; 48-51; 67-70)

The lyrical I juxtaposes those elements that are within reach, that are palpable, with the problems that seep into her world via omnipresent technology. One cannot longer see the wood for the trees: truths become uncertain statements (ll. 15-23; 31-3), the banal is treated equally as the important (ll. 43-4; 48-51), and one cannot escape any of it (ll. 36-40).

It could be assumed that via more data and information one would gain more knowledge and understanding, yet the lyrical I here points out this is not the case. In contrast, the more the world “spins tighter”, the more incoherent everything seems to become.
The final stanza could serve as a summary to the entire first chapter of this dissertation, as it reflects the dizzying effect of globalization, which compresses the space, connects the local to the global, and is fascinating as well as terrifying for the individual, who no longer can rely on existing frameworks to understand the world.

Spahr problematizes the network society that Castells describes. Though information never has been more accessible, Spahrs poetry points out that contemporary individuals are “missing [...] the relationship between touch and information in an era of constant news streams.” (Mayer 50)

Her poetry becomes a way to reconnect, because it requires critical contemplation (Mayer 50). Her poetry evokes a reflection on events on a global scale, as well as on our others (cf. Mayer 50).

3.2.2. Overt Politics and Ecological Awareness

In regard to politics and ecology, Spahr can be said to approach both in a direct and often explicit manner. That which Beck, Giddens and Lash refer to as reflexive modernization is especially applicable to the message Spahr expresses in This Connection of Everyone With Lungs and Well Then There Now, as they often deal with meditating on the effects of globalization and modernization. A first indication of the reflexive content is the collections’ cover illustrations (see appendix).

With This Connection of Everyone with Lungs the cover displays a horse and a flock of birds on – what the information on the inside back cover reveals to be – a garbage dump in Brazil. The illustration shows how nature has been corrupted and polluted by human-made waste and impels readers – even before opening the collection – to reflect upon the effects of contemporary (modern and globalised) life.
Additionally, the fact that the illustration shows a Brazilian location, when the collection itself is written and in a way characterised by Hawai‘i, can be said to point out how globalization affects both local and global.

However, there is hope and this is reflected by the choice of colour, being a bright green. This colour can be said to refer to hope, and seeing that the poems of the collections indeed do express a sense of expectation and aspiration for a change for the better. Furthermore, it iterates an ecological message that will play an important part in the collection, green being associated with ecological philosophy (also known as green politics). The cover illustration adds to the collection in the sense that it already creates the right – reflexive – mindset to start reading the poems themselves.

A similar thing holds true for the cover of Well Then There Now, which is made up by an array of different birds of a diversely coloured plumage. This cover iterates the importance of bird imagery in Spahr’s work, which was also highly dominant in This Connection of Everyone with Lungs, and mirrors the content of one of the poems in the collection, namely the poem “Unnamed Dragonfly Species”, since this poem is infused with various animal species that are being enumerated throughout the text.

The nineteen pages long poem does not focus solely on birds, but similarly to the cover illustration, enumerates various kinds of species. Throughout the entire poem every verse line is succeeded by an animal species. The animal names are printed in bold, which makes them stand out, and alphabetically ordered, which provides the poem with a structure and consistency.

In the poem Spahr expresses a clear concern for ecological diversity. Even though not all of these animal species enumerated in this poem are threatened, many of them are. By constantly interspersing them in between verse lines, she constantly raises
awareness to them. The ecological message of the non-bold, full sentence verse lines themselves is no less apparent:

In November of the previous year a big piece of the Antarctic Pine Island glacier broke off. [...] What had it been like for the penguins or the fish? [...] The connected relationship between water and land seemed deeply damaged, perhaps beyond repair in numerous places. Vesper Sparrow The systems of relation between living things of all sorts seemed to have become in recent centuries so hierarchically human that things not human were dying at an unprecedented rate. (Spahr, WTTN 76-7; 93, ll. 9-10; 35-6; 283-7)

The focus of this poem lies on the fact that humans are threatening – i.a. via globalization and modernization, causing pollution and global warming – the richness and well-fare of the planet and its creatures.

In general, Spahr's reflexive focus on ecology can be seen as a way to re-embed (cf. Beck et al. vi-ii, 6). The lyrical I directs her attention to the eco-diversity and negative effects of globalization, and wishes to counter them. It evokes the sense that one is able to act and do something about the issues, instead of remaining a passive onlooker (cf. Beck et al. vi-ii, 6).

In addition to ecology and collectivity, which lie at the heart of Well Then There Now, This Connection of Everyone with Lungs also concentrates on expressing a pacifist message. For one thing, the collection is highly influenced by the location at which it was written, namely Hawai'i. There are numerous direct description of the location, all of
which can be called idyllic to say the least. For instance in the following excerpt from the section “March 16, 2003”:

We reclined as we spoke, we reclined and the sand that coated our arms and legs is known for a softness that is distinctive in the islands and the waves were a gentle one to three feet and a soft breeze blew through the ironwoods and we were surrounded by ditches, streams, and wetland areas, which serve as a habitat for endangered waterbird species.

There are other sorts of beauty on this globe, but this sort of beauty is fully realized here.

This sort of beauty cannot get any more beautiful, any more detailed, any more rich or perfect. (Spahr, CEL 66, ll. 22-31)

Spahr here paints a picture of a perfectly harmonic, balanced island full of vivacity. The adjective used all refer to softness and gentleness. Additionally the location is described as enclosed by both brackish and fresh water (sea, streams etc.), symbolically turning it into a rejuvenating and life-providing place. This is then further highlighted by the lyrical I mentioning these wetland areas is “habitat for/ endangered waterbird species.” (CEL 66, ll. 26-7) These, like a safe haven, provide a home for an endangered bird. However, she immediately contradicts this idyll in the lines following this excerpt:

But the beach on which we reclined is occupied by the US military so every word we said was shaped by other words, every moment of beauty occupied.

We watched the planes fly overhead from the nearby airbase as we spoke of birds and their bowers and their habits of nest and
we were also speaking of rolling start and shock and awe and two
hundred and twenty-five thousand American forces and another
ninety thousand on the way and twenty-five thousand British
forces and one thousand Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps
combat and support aircraft in the area.

And because the planes flew overhead when we spoke of the cries
of birds our every word was an awkward squawk that meant also
AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, UH-60 Black Hawk troop
helicopter, [...]  
[...] the names of things still arriving, the B-2
stealth bombers from Whiteman Air Force Base, the B-52 bombers
that are now in Britain. (Spahr, CEL 67, ll. 32-44; 48-50)

The coordinating conjunction but in line 32 marks an ironic volta in the poem. At this
point the lyrical I shows that the idyll never was a true locus amoenus, but is polluted
and corrupted with violence. This violence is partly expressed by words such as “force”,
“combat”, “cries” and “bombers” and partly by her enumeration of various machines
used by the army – each specifically listed by its proper name. The specific, technical
terms are quite harsh in contrast to the beginning of the poem, and heighten the contrast
to the supposed idyll.

The lyrical I debunks the stereotypical image of the Hawaiian beach as an earthly
paradise. Not just nature is threatened, also the peaceful community or being-with, as
the presence of violence turns “our every word” into “an awkward squawk”, hindering
communication.
Spahr’s work here shows how there can no longer be a clear distinction between local and global events, everything is interconnected. Spahr here reflects on what Castells terms the network society (cf. xxxv). Bauman’s theories can help account for the fear and the ominous atmosphere of the poem, as he believes globalization installs a fear in people due to a feeling of being more unprotected, now that there are no more barriers to keep the bad out (cf. Bauman, LT7-8)
Conclusions

The objective of this dissertation was to investigate how globalization and modernization affect the writing of Ben Lerner and Juliana Spahr. By means of the theoretical framework, as well as a close reading of the material, chapter II dealt with the analysis of Lerner’s and Spahr’s works in regard to the representation of the individual, the community, and technology, politics and ecology. A second goal was to examine how contemporary globalization theories can bring an added value to the interpretation of contemporary poetry.

In general it can be said that Lerner’s work sooner adheres to Bauman’s theories, and that Spahr’s poetry is more closely related to the viewpoint of Nancy. This manifests itself mostly in their respective views on the individual and the community.

In regard to the representation of the individual, one finds that Lerner focuses on the fragmentation of the self. Bauman's theories can help account for i.a. the contrast between the outward order and the interior ‘chaos’ of Lerner's works. The exterior order and structure can be seen as a manifestation of the desire for an ordered life project and a wish for a stable “bed”. Yet, in a world that no longer contains any solids, the individual is destined to constantly self-create and remain fragmented, as is reflected by Lerner's use of the stream-of-consciousness technique.

In contrast, Spahr presents her readers with a strong, self-assured lyrical I, who, in moments of doubt and angst, turns to the collective for support and comfort. It is this collective or the importance of the unit that forms the main leitmotif in Spahr’s work. Like Nancy, Spahr’s lyrical I sees the collective, the being-with, as a healing, powerful, mondialising force. The fact that to Spahr the collective is the natural state of being is
additionally reflected in the metaphors that are used to refer to the unit, e.g. breathing and blood.

However, and here Spahr’s outlook diverges from the one from Nancy, Spahr does not see the *being-with* as an absorbing whole. Instead, the unit that is represented, is one in which each individual still remains a unique and separate *Being*.

On the other hand, Lerner usually problematizes the community, as well as communication. Here Nancy allows us to interpret the problematized community and communication as linked to one another. When communication, the medium via which meaning is shared, is hindered – which Lerner does by presenting the reader with a chaotic train of thought –, the formation of a collective is subsequently impeded as well.

Lerner’s work is not always analogous to Bauman’s theories. For instance, there is one major exception to the unit being problematized and that is the dual unit the lyrical I in *Mean Free Path* forms with Ariana.

Spahr’s unit is, as I already mentioned, an all-encompassing one. In her work the persona often speaks out to the “unit”, proclaiming her desire to form a global connection. So whereas Lerner’s *Mean Free Path* can be seen as a love poem for Ariana, Spahr’s *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* and *Well Then There Now* can be seen as love poems that reach out to everyone, to all “beloveds”.

Both Lerner’s and Spahr’s works are characterized by *reflexive modernization* as well as by the increasing interconnection of the local and the global. Additionally, both poets wish to make their readers *reflexive* as well, but via different approaches.

Lerner’s persona often reacts to the overwhelming, increasingly violent and interconnected world with scepticism and indifference. This reaction also can be better
understood with the help of globalization theories. That is, the indifference can be interpreted as a reaction of self-defence against the overwhelming effects of globalization, which is described by Bauman as well as Nancy (cf. Bauman, *IS* 35-6; cf. Nancy, *CWG* 33-5) Lerner’s poetry wishes to highlight the dangers of losing oneself in the stream of knowledge and technology, by showing that it might turn the individual into an indifferent person.

Furthermore, Lerner stimulates the reader to critically engage with the issues at hand by puzzling them and complicating the communication. The fragmentation and “bricolage or collage” force the reader to actively engage and reflect on the poems in order to be able to reconstruct the message (Rogers 223).

Spahr reacts to the same things, but in a direct manner, overtly expressing her concern for the issues. She wishes to inform people, e.g. about the eco-diversity and global warming. By means of informing others, she hopes to spark a critical reflection in others. Additionally, Spahr reaches out to the “beloveds” and encourage them to unite. From Nancy's perspective, Spahr's discourse can be explained as a form of *mondialisation*, which struggles with *globalization* by opposing it and creatively acting against it.

Although Lerner has a completely different approach, his work too, can be interpreted as *mondialisation*, as he problematizes the effects of *globalization* and incites the reader to critically contemplate the world.

In general, the application of globalization theories to contemporary poetry allows us to gain more insight as to why poets reflect on certain elements in a specific way. On the other hand, the poetic analysis also allows us to add some nuances to the globalization theories and show that a situation never is entirely black-and-white.
Poetry, being a medium of subjective self-expression, allows us to see how one particular lyric voice reacts and reflects on certain circumstances, in the case of this dissertation, on globalization and modernization. The situation in the poems is highly subjective and personal, and often cannot be covered by just one theoretical viewpoint. A clear example here would be the comparison of Bauman’s theories and Lerner’s work in regard to the community. Lerner might problematize the community, yet his persona in *Mean Free Path* does find comfort in a dual unit. Connection to others is not impossible, in contrast to what Bauman and Beck sometimes suggest (cf. Bauman, *LT* 14; cf. Beck 36). Though there might be a trend toward individualization, Lerner’s and Spahr’s poetry would suggest that a true, healing connection to others still is possible.

Lastly, by comparing the works of Lerner and Spahr, it becomes especially clear that individual reactions can be highly divergent. Lerner and Spahr, though both are exposed to the same global developments, living in the same time and era, often approach the matter entirely differently.

With this dissertation I hope I was able to convincingly demonstrate how globalization is present in contemporary American poetry and how a cross-disciplinary analysis can only enrich the reading of both theory and poetry. I can only wish that my research sparks an interest in others and might give rise to further research and other analyses.

As a final remark, I would like to add that although sociology, philosophy and literature might appear to be completely different fields of study, in the end, aren’t both the theorist and the poet observing the same world?
Bibliography

1. Primary Sources


2. Secondary Sources


3. Illustrations


Appendix

(All illustrations were scanned by me, unless indicated otherwise.)

1. Lerner, The Lichtenberg Figures

1.1. Cover

1.2. Spadix – Spathe

2. Lerner, Mean Free Path

2.1. Cover

3. Spahr, This Connection of Everyone with Lungs

3.1. Cover

4. Spahr, Well Then There Now

4.1. Cover

4.2. Example of Two Mirroring Sonnets in *Well Then There Now*

```
A catalogue of the individual, a catalogue of us with all,
A catalogue of full of thought.
A house where we with all our complexities lie,
A catalogue of blood.

A catalogue of us with all our complexities.
A catalogue of how we are all full of thought and connection.
The house where we are from and the house where we live.
All things to be said more largely than the personal way.

There is in this the thought of home.
Those who had a home.
Those who have a right to a home.
And there is those who took and those who stayed in the taking.

The house of difference when we look.
The house of norms and abnormalities and their percentages.
```


4.3. Illustrations to “Dole Street”

Illustration 1, street sign

Illustration 2, diagram


4.4. Illustrations to “2199 Kalia Street”


4.5. Example of a Section of *Well Then There Now* with Map and Geographic Coordinates