

# Destabilising the Anthropocene in Voice, Listening and Poetic Potential: Ecoacoustics in Forrest Gander's *Twice Alive*

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## Abstract

This essay explores the ecoacoustical potential of poetry through a close analysis of Forrest Gander's *Twice Alive* (2021). It considers the ability of ecopoetry to destabilise anthropocentric definitions of "voice" and "listening", asking how poetry might shift our perception of sound to that beyond the limits of human experience. Drawing from ecoacoustics, this essay argues that Gander's work invites a more embodied and multisensory form of listening that the poetry presents as ecological. Through innovating language, structure, and form, *Twice Alive* blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman, visual and auditory, encouraging a deeper awareness of ecological interconnection. Not only does this essay suggest that poetry can offer readers an immersive way to reconsider the audial phenomena of natural world, but it also highlights the underexplored potential of poetics to contain sounds of new definitions.

## Introduction

Ecoacoustics is a field of soundscape studies that investigates human influences on the geophonic (environmental sounds) and the biophonic (biological sounds). In Jeff Tilton's collection of essays, *Toward a Sound Ecology* (2020), he argues that "in our posthuman Anthropocene, distinctions blur between culture and nature, between music and sound, and between humans and nonhuman beings" (255). This essay is interested in the capacity of poetry to blur "distinctions", particularly between the visual and audial, drawing attention to how words and sounds might merge within a poetic format. In *Twice Alive*, Forrest Gander, a

poet interested in ecopoetics, prompts readers to reconsider their anthropocentric perception of both “voice” and “listening”. In his essay “A Faithful Existence”, Gander states that “the basic gesture of [his] writing is a listening”, emphasising his belief in the ability of poetry to transcend conventional modes of perception. Through an ecoacoustic lens, this essay will consider how Gander exemplifies the ecoacoustical potential of poetry in the content, form and structure of his writing, and how these elements work together to collapse distinctions between our eyes and ears and create an immersive soundscape. This essay will analyse Gander’s work to explore the capacity of ecoacoustics in poetry and how it might be used to not only prompt a reader to redefine their anthropocentric notions of sound but also challenge them to hear beyond the limits of their own human perception through writing.

### **Ecoacoustics in *Twice Alive***

The destabilisation of human-centredness in audial phenomena is central to ecoacoustics, and Gander attempts a similar technique by prompting the reader to revise their anthropocentric interpretation of communication and sound. He begins *Twice Alive* with the poem “Aubade” (pp.13), which immediately challenges the reader’s understanding of “voice”. The concept of “voice” occurs three times in the poem: the voices of “towhees • scratching” (4); the human voice “flecked with sleep beside you” (5); and the voice of “absence speaking intimately” (8). The Oxford English Dictionary defines “voice” as the “sound produced by [...] a specific person or animal” through “vocal organs”. However, Gander expands this definition to include non-laryngeal sounds, such as the scratching of towhees and the inaudible sounds of “absence”. Thus, the concept of “voice” in this context is expanded respectively into three categories, that being the sounds of the body, the larynx, and absence. The poem acknowledges its unconventional approach by selectively attaching variations of the conditional clause “if they can be called voices” to both the “voices” of an inhuman body and absence:

[...] Can you hear the voices, • if they can be called voices,  
of towhees • scratching in the garden and then • the creaky low  
husky • voice flecked with sleep beside you in bed •  
[...]  
can you • make out the voice, if it can be • called a voice, of  
absence speaking

(3-8)

By not applying this clause to the human “voice”, the poem recognises that “voice” is typically associated with human-centred communication. Gander begins his collection by broadening this definition to include to non-laryngeal sounds, which opens the reader to an ecoacoustical mindset. By doing this, the poet invites his reader to collapse their anthropocentric definitions of auditory communication, preparing them to be immersed into an ecoacoustical soundscape through poetry.

Gander further exposes the reader to an ecoacoustical thinking by portraying the idea that sound can both exist and be heard without the act of listening itself. Through poetry he promotes a more visceral or embodied experience of sound, suggesting that his redefinition of “voice” might also challenge the traditional act of hearing as a conscious, auditory process. As discussed, in “Aubade” the speaker applies the term “voice” to sounds of the larynx, body and absence. The “voice” of absence is what interests this analysis:

can you • make out the voice, if it can be • called a voice, of  
absence speaking • intimately to you, directly, I know • you must  
hear it feelingly, a low vibration in • your bones

(7-9)

By common definition, the concept of “absence speaking” is an oxymoron, with absence being traditionally understood as silence and therefore imperceptible. However, this phrase is immediately followed with an attempt at expanding our understanding of hearing, suggesting that the act involves more than just human auditory perception and that even absent sounds can be heard “feelingly” within our body. The voice of absence is portrayed as “a low vibration”, giving recognition to the sounds outside of the human hearing range and further destabilising anthropocentric assumptions of audial phenomena. This theme of non-verbal communication that is felt, rather than heard, is later read in “Unto Ourselves” (pp.14-16):

listen to clumped wild-rye  
shushing the dunes  
while the pulverized rock shrieked along fault lines  
in decibels so muted only the soles of our feet,  
conducting the ground’s sound up into our tali, could register what

was happening

(17-22)

Here, the speaker can only “register” the “shriek[ing]” voice of the pulverized rocks through the “soles of [their] feet”. By adapting the act of listening to the “muted”, inaudible voices of nature from the ear to the body, Gander further challenges anthropocentric models of hearing and our perception of communicative sound. Therefore, through the content of his poetry, Gander urges the reader to widen their interpretation of “voices” and acknowledge ecoacoustical communication that exists beyond human ears alone.

After making these initial efforts to redefine the reader’s understanding of audial phenomena, Gander prompts them to engage directly with this new way of “listening”. He uses his poetry to phonetically imagine how inaudible ecological voices might sound to the human body, beginning *Twice Alive* with the lines, “Can you hear dawn edging close, hear • soft light with its vacuum /fingertips” (“Aubade”, 1-2). Here, Gander aptly uses synaesthesia, merging the senses of sight and hearing, to suggest that “soft light” could be something that might be heard. This challenges the reader to imagine the geophony of dawn; how might something visual, like light, sound? This technique is again repeated in “Aubade II”:

did he hear as the light flickered • flickered  
 on the mountain’s face • what entered his body through his ears •  
 through the desolate desolated desolation of his eyes •  
 (7-9)

The reader is again urged to imagine the sound that might accompany light, recognising that, despite its silence, something imperceptible might still be entering the subject’s body “through his ears” (8). Gander aids the reader in imagining this possibility, by using the phonetical capacity of poetry to allude to the sounds beyond human perception. By using the repeated fricative “flickered”, he engages the reader phonetically into how they might begin to imagine an audible light. This is furthered by considering Gander’s interview with Ann van Buren, where he admitted that through the black dots often used in his poems (“•”) he is “setting up almost a call and response across that gap”. This admittance suggests that the repetition of “flickered • flickered” across a dot literarily presents an echo to the reader, adding depth to their auditory experience of imagining light.

Language, for Gander, is an innovative tool with the ability to capacitate a poem with its own soundscape. Further analysing how he achieves this in “Aubade II” (pp.33), it is clear that this poem is saturated with soft consonances and alliterations: “his firelighting kit • flint flakes and a tinder conk”; “froze & thawed & froze again • for 5,000 years” (4, 6). By building this poetical euphony of soft-sounding consonants with auditory depth, the reader becomes structurally immersed in the possible geophonic sounds that light might create. This gentle soundscape resonates with the physical sensory nature of the “soft light” alluded to in the first “Aubade” poem, emphasising how an embodied, visceral hearing has influenced this auditory imagining. Through utilising phonetics, Gander showcases the imperceptible aural possibilities of light, a silent phenomenon. To emphasise how this poem immerses us into our own imaginations, Gander shatters the reader’s immersion into this soundscape with the “desolate desolated desolation of his eyes” (9). The repetition of the hard constant disrupts the lulling rhythm of the soundscape, “desolate[ing]” the auditory experience with attention to sight.

Questioning why Gander introduces a visual symbol like light within an otherwise aural experience is key to understanding the ecoacoustical depth of his poetry. As discussed earlier, language is the poet’s tool in achieving a literary soundscape, and, through this, *Twice Alive* becomes the gradual process that aims to immerse its reader into an ecoacoustical experience. As identified so far, Gander begins this process by challenging the reader’s anthropocentric concept of “voice” and pushing them to consider ecological sounds outside of their perception. Following these steps, the choice of using light, a silent phenomenon, becomes more significant when we consider the notion that it also draws attention to the poetic form itself.

Gander draws attention to the written page in the opening lines of *Twice Alive*, where the speaker prompts the reader to “hear • soft light” (“Aubade”, 1). Here, Gander encourages the reader to become aware of their own sensory experience; the “soft light” on the page of the poem is essential for it to be read. Timothy Morton’s concept of “ecomimesis” in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) offers insight here. Morton defines this literary device as a technique used to evoke a sense of nature’s reality by drawing attention to the text’s own constructed nature and attempting to overcome mere aesthetic representation (31). Through this concept, Gander’s poetry can be recognised as not only exploring ecological sounds but attempting to recreate them, using language and structure to immerse the reader in an ecoacoustical soundscape that transcends the written page. The purposeful disruption of the

hard consonance of a “desolate desolated desolation [of] eyes” (9) in “Aubade II” therefore breaks the poetical soundscape, drawing the reader’s attention to the page and through such disruption forcing us to acknowledge the potential capacity of the poetic form to contain sound. Gander’s poetry therefore invites the reader to engage with the ecological sounds not only visually, but also through an immersive, inner auditory experience, enabling us to hear ecological voices in our own inner soundscapes. The process of *Twice Alive* thus invites the reader to move beyond simply ecologically revising their definitions of “voice” and “hearing” and further prompts them to immerse themselves in the ecological voices, sounds and rhythms embedded within the poetry.

A full immersion into the poetic soundscape is achieved by blurring the lines between human and nonhuman voices, effectively replicating an ecoacoustical experience by utilising the ‘co-vibrating’ properties of sound. The poem “Twice Alive III: Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais” (pp.55-61) is saturated with sensual imagery that immerses the speaker in a co-existence with nature:

the hum of some large insect  
 immelmanning around  
 our heads calls to mind,  
 you tell me, the **low drone**  
 of a Buddhist chant

(61-65)

This excerpt distinguishes between a speaker and their companion (“you”) and uses a bold font to emphasise our shared auditory experience of the “**low drone**” of nature around us. Through blurring boundaries between human and non-human sounds, the poem creates a ‘co-vibration’ between the speaker, the reader and the natural world. Jeff Tilton discusses sound’s ability to connect through vibrations: “A sound signal is sent through a medium from one vibrating being to another, and with that the two beings are connected, vibrating together” (255). The ‘co-vibration’ between the speaker, reader and nature is alluded to in the initial stanza of the poem, as the reader begins this experience with the very first “reverberations of our steps” (5). The embodied, auditory experience grows as the poem progresses. Whilst becoming further immersed in the soundscape, the speaker describes a chanting sound exuding from “**redtrembling** sprigs” as a “congregate speech”, a sound

indecipherable to human ears (68-69). Despite the incomprehensible nature of this chanting, the speaker experiences a sense of innate recognition and resonates with the sound:

[a] vascular language prior to our

**breathed** language, corporeal, chemical,  
drawing our sound into its harmonic, tuning  
us to what we've not yet seen, the surround  
calling us, theory-less, toward an inference  
of horizontal connections

(71-75)

This excerpt speaks to Gander's redefinition of "voice" and explicates how ecological sounds might connect and intersect with human sounds. The speaker suggests that their "**breathed** language" is inferior to the elevated ecological voices surrounding them. Yet, their voice is not overwhelmed or dominated by nature; instead, it is embraced and integrated "into its harmonic". Alike to musical harmonics, the human voice is resonant with the "vascular language" of nature, blurring the human and non-human voices to 'co-vibrate' together and become part of the same surrounding soundscape.

The reader's immersion into this poetic soundscape is further emphasised by the physical distinction between the speaker, the reader, and nature itself becoming structurally blurred. The speaker initially describes the "vascular language" as "in-/dependent (of us) but detectable" (76-77). Here the pronouns in this poem shift from personal and second-person pronouns, which create clear boundaries between the speaker and the reader, to collective pronouns. They suggest that, though it cannot be understood in human language, this ecological voice can be witnessed through an embodied hearing that seems to "[take] us over, over ourselves" (82). Who the collective pronouns are referring to seems to gradually evolve as the poem progresses and the ecoacoustical experience becomes heightened. At this point, the collective pronouns appear to represent humanity itself, emphasised by the use of parenthesis that structurally separates the human from the ecological that is "in-/dependent (of us)". But as the speaker and reader become fully immersed in practicing an embodied hearing, they become indistinguishable from "the world" around them:

"[hear] the call from elsewhere which

is just where we are, no, even  
 closer, **inside** us inside the blood-  
 pulse of our bodies, the bristle of  
 our mosses, the **embrace--**, and exhale” (101-105)

As the collective speaker urges the reader to “hear the call from elsewhere”, the corporeal “bodies” and “mosses” of both nature and human become merged into an “**embrace**”. Just as Tilton describes the capability of sound to connect, Gander attempts to utilise this possibility, not only through audial experiences but also through the ecoacoustical possibilities of poetic structure. As we practice a completely embodied form of hearing, our voices become indistinguishable from those of the speaker, but also from nature.

As both the poem and the collection progress, the reader becomes so deeply immersed into an ecoacoustical soundscape that they become able to understand the previously indecipherable ecological voices. This is seen towards the end of the collection, where italics becomes a tool for translating the voice of nature. The first example of this being used is in the “*check check check*” of a scrub jay, an onomatopoeia that connects the use of italics to ecological sounds (“Twice Alive III”, 15). It is after the speaker and reader become collectively immersed in the ecoacoustical soundscape that the inaudible “vascular language” of nature becomes decipherable:

but now we really hear chanting  
 we can't decode—*Don't*  
*be so rational*—a congregate speech  
 (65-67)

The phrase is again repeated once the reader and speaker have become indistinguishable from the “**embrace**” (105) of the soundscape:

[...] can't  
 you hear—*Don't be so*  
*rational*—the world **inhale**?  
 (98-99)

As the speaker and reader merge with the ecoacoustic environment, the distinction between human and nonhuman voice continues to fade, and the italics becomes an integral method for translating the elusive “voice of absence” (“Aubade”, 7-8). This technique

continues later in the collection, in the highly unconventional poem “The Redwoods” (pp.65-71), where italics are used more frequently to translate ecological voices. By doing this, the poem signals the reader’s growing resonance with the sounds of nature, not through passive description, but through their gradual immersion into the poetic process and, consequently, the nonhuman world. The italic phrases, fragmented over the poem’s sections, present ecological voices as something beyond mere description, as well as “unacknowledged”:

*“not description”* (pp.65)

*“not description but an un-acknowledged chapter”* (pp.67)

*“not description but an un-acknowledged chapter of our own memoir”* (pp.69)

*“ [...] an endless memoir of ravelment in which our case likewise has been underwritten”* (pp.71)

[It is important to note the structure of these quotes are not accurate, as the poem resists conventional formatting.]

As the penultimate poem of the collection, “The Redwoods” utilises an italics font to prove the reader’s growing ability to interpret the inaudible “voice of absence” as they awaken to an ecoacoustical mindset. As we become immersed in the ecoacoustical soundscape of the poem and practice our embodied hearing, boundaries blur between the collective “memoir” of both human and nonhuman worlds punctuating our auditory, poetic experience.

Conclusively, Gander’s *Twice Alive* not only revises the reader’s understanding of “voice” and “listening” but supports these redefinitions by utilising poetic language to push the boundaries of our perception. Through poetry he invites readers to acknowledge the inaudible sounds of nature, prompting them to move beyond a human-centred auditory experience into a more embodied, visceral understanding of ecological communication. By blurring the boundaries between what is read and what is heard, Gander reveals poetry’s capacity to not only represent sound, but to create a deeply immersive ecoacoustic experience that bears the potential to destabilise human-centric thinking. This is achieved by innovating language through techniques such as shifting pronouns and strategizing with italics to destabilise anthropocentrism from the narrative and integrate the reader into the poetic soundscape as they practice a more embodied hearing. Ultimately, *Twice Alive* challenges readers to listen in new ways, offering alternative means of perception

that celebrates the interconnectedness of the ecoacoustic once we completely unbind ourselves from anthropocentric definitions.

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