



# Sing a New Song to the City: Ambient Rhetoric and Urban Hymns

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Risen Lord, shall yet the city  
be the city of despair?  
Come today, our judge, our glory.  
Be its name “The Lord is there!”

—Erik Routley

**M**y first Harvest Festival as pastor in rural Minnesota was an eye-opener. Having grown up in a medium-sized city, and later attending seminary in a very large one, much about the church festival in this town of 1,100 people was totally novel: sheaves of wheat from a member’s farm decorated the sanctuary and fellowship hall; pumpkins, gourds, and cornucopia appeared on the communion table; and the Sunday’s offering doubled in size. When planning worship, I also vividly remember the bounty of hymns appropriate for a Sunday celebrating fall’s harvest, creation, and farming. When we sang, “Come, ye thankful people, come, / raise the song of harvest home; / all is safely gathered in / ere the winter storms begin,” the hymn sparkled with literal meaning.<sup>1</sup> For that rural community celebrating the

<sup>1</sup>Henry Alford, “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come,” *Hymnary.org*, [http://www.hymnary.org/text/come\\_ye\\_thankful\\_people\\_come](http://www.hymnary.org/text/come_ye_thankful_people_come) (accessed September 1, 2016).

*Hymns are a key component of how Christians express their faith. But many of these hymns do represent the rhythms and sensibilities of an older and largely agrarian world. Using the concept of “ambient rhetoric,” Adam Copeland suggests that it is time for other hymns that represent the ethos of daily life in an increasingly urbanized world, hymns that will speak to the realities of urban culture.*

harvest, praising God as “Lord of the harvest” became a meaningful act of contextual worship.

While my time serving a rural congregation was a true gift, today I live in a city again. Chances are, you do too. More than half of the world’s population lives in cities.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, more than 80% live in urban areas.<sup>3</sup> Urban congregations may certainly hold their own Harvest Festival worship services, but the connection to actual harvest is nothing like that of my rural congregation. Members there farmed, ran the local grain elevator, owned hundreds of acres of land, met each week to talk crop prices, served on the governing boards of national agriculture organizations, and took Sunday afternoon drives to check out the fields. If my current urban congregation held a Harvest Festival, we would have to buy our sheaves of wheat at a big-box craft store.

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*“If we look closely at the hymns we sing and the prayers we utter, we will find that most of the images and references are rural and idyllic. There is little that celebrates the city. Even more than that, there is a suspicion that country is good and city is bad.”*

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In recent years, urban congregations have sought to claim their own rituals. In cities like Denver, Boston, and Minneapolis, where bicycling culture has gained significant popularity, congregations celebrate Blessing of the Bikes liturgies. Each Ash Wednesday, pastors in cities leave the church office to set up “Ashes to Go” stations at public transit stops. At rallies and protests supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, clergy march and pray for justice in the city streets.

Whereas urban pastors today may be leading their congregations in deeply contextual ministry, most denominational hymnals privilege the rural over urban life. Nancy Elizabeth Hardy, author of a book that addresses this inequality, writes, “If we look closely at the hymns we sing and the prayers we utter, we will find that most of the images and references are rural and idyllic. There is little that celebrates the city. Even more than that, there is a suspicion that country is good and city is bad.”<sup>4</sup> As a member of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song that selected the hymns for inclusion in the most recent hymnal of the Presbyterian Church (USA), I certainly understand the challenge of resourcing a diverse church with hymns, songs, and spiritual songs. This essay, therefore, is by no means an attempt to tut-tut hymnal committees. Neither do I intend to conduct any sort of quantitative study seeking to measure every urban and rural hymn reference, rank-

<sup>2</sup>Somini Sengupta, “U.N. Finds Most People Now Live in Cities,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/world/more-than-half-the-global-population-growth-is-urban-united-nations-report-finds.html> (accessed September 1, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Lisa Lambert, “More Americans Move to Cities in Past Decade-Census,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/usa-cities-population-idUSL2E8EQ5AJ20120326> (accessed September 1, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Nancy Elizabeth Hardy, *Worship in the City: Prayers and Songs for Urban Settings* (United Church Publishing House, The United Church of Canada, 2015), Introduction.

ing them somehow on a geographic positivity scale. While I am certainly open to calls for expanding our repertoire of congregational song in a way that gives cities their due, in this space I will instead introduce a way of appreciating what is around us, and how that environment impacts us. To do so, I suggest that Thomas Rickert's theory of ambient rhetoric, a proposal for a deep, multilayered awareness of lived realities, presents fascinating possibilities for expanding our perception of *neighbor* today. By using the lens of ambient rhetoric to look upon several city-focused hymns, I argue for an expanded conception of neighbor beyond the mere human, or even the material, a conception that includes all the ambient involvements of care that awake our perceptions.

### THE AMBIENT RHETORIC OF THOMAS RICKERT

In recent years, theologians have sought to parse what city life means for contemporary Christianity, including a renewed emphasis for urban ministry and community organizing, as well as interfaith and interreligious engagement. These are important, laudable projects. Adjacent to these religious efforts, Thomas Rickert, a scholar of rhetoric and professor of English, examines how technologies, materials, and human agency relate to our understanding of human development and culture. Clergy have much to learn from Rickert, who refashions a way of appreciating the world and how we function as neighbor to one another—and creation—in it.

To begin, while with Rickert I will employ the word “rhetoric” here, take note that its meaning journeys well beyond the traditional notion of rhetoric as mere persuasion, or in the words of Thomas Cole, “a speaker’s or writer’s self-conscious manipulation of his medium with a view to ensuring his message as favorable a reception as possible on the part of the particular audience being addressed.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, for Rickert, rhetoric is ambient and is deeply connected to the world and our dwelling in it. Rickert’s notion of the world is more than simply the mundane reality of things noticeably present, but also “the involvements and cares that emerge within and alongside the material environment and that in turn work to bring to presence the environs in the mode that they currently take.”<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, part of the worldly nature of Rickert’s understanding of rhetoric stems from his assertion that rhetorical work flows from our connections and life together in the world, and the direction we see ourselves moving toward. Rhetoric, then, “accomplishes its work by inducing us to shift, at least potentially, how we dwell or see ourselves dwelling in the world.”<sup>7</sup> By “ambient” Rickert refers to both the “ambient age” in which we now live and “the active role that the material and informational environment takes in human development, dwelling, and cul-

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013) 35.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., xii–xiii.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., xiii.

ture.”<sup>8</sup> Ambience shifts. Ambience is what is lying about, but also what is about to become. Therefore, ambient rhetoric “brings the world to us but in doing so transforms” how we perceive ourselves in it.<sup>9</sup> Applying this notion to forms of writing and texts, Rickert suggests attuning to ambience leads from “metaphors of node, connection” to “metaphors of environment, place, and surroundings.”<sup>10</sup> When it comes to cities, then, an ambient perspective appreciates the complexities of how time, memory, connections, and even conceptions of the future affect our relationship with space. As we will see below, the city is much more than an interchangeable scene (as if a prop in a play) in which human actors relate as neighbor. Instead, the city itself becomes an inextricable actor—a neighbor—as well. Having tackled this understanding of ambience, Rickert moves on to *kairos*.

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Rickert does not abandon the classic notion of *kairos* as the appropriate moment, or when it comes to rhetoric, the timely appointment of a rhetorical act or, relatedly, “the ability of a rhetor to invent appropriately in a given situation.”<sup>11</sup> Rickert contends, however, that *kairos* should be approached with appreciation of the material, embedding notions of time more closely in place to give *kairos* a spatial quality. Building on Mark Taylor’s notion of intention, particularly related to writing, Rickert plays with Taylor’s conception of space, and the metaphor of network culture. Rickert appreciates how Taylor notes that “writing cannot be understood as a discrete, individualized entity bounded by skin and self-image...for in writing we entwine ourselves with the accoutrements of writing...the things dotting the local environment and the environment itself, the larger infrastructure, other people, even our own bodies.”<sup>12</sup> For Taylor, *kairos* “renders agency as something distributed” that transcends individual human bodies. But, while Taylor prefers to use the metaphor of network to describe this notion, Rickert prefers his notion of ambience because it deemphasizes links, and appreciates connections beyond those that meet only at points or nodes. The environment is more complex than simple connections, more expansive than mere humanity. For city dwellers, then, our appreciation must extend far beyond Sunday School notions of people, animals, and perhaps, creation as neighbor. For Rickert, “an ambient rhetoric attends to ways of being in the world,”<sup>13</sup> but tends not to disentangle an individ-

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 119.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., xvi.

ual—or any single person, place, or thing, for that matter—as to be engaged separately. The city, therefore, becomes an engaged, expansive partner in living together. Rickert builds this argument from an ancient one, as when Protagoras described the city as the teacher of virtue.<sup>14</sup> As my neighbor, then, the city teaches me what architecture lasts, what human interactions succeed, what and when to feel emotions, and what questions of justice remain most potent.

Finally, Rickert's notion of *attunement* or *mood* proves a helpful guide when analyzing urban hymns. Theorizing with philosopher Martin Heidegger's work in the 1920s, Rickert updates Heidegger's *Stimmung*, translated "mood" or "attunement." Attunement is how we are embedded or situated in the world. This is more than physical environment, but all the co-created entanglements experienced. For example, in an extended interview conducted in a pub, Rickert says that, in effect, "Even when you're drinking alone, it's still social,"<sup>15</sup> by which he means the experiences of the room, the taste of the beer, the memories recalled, the sounds of the space, all of this perceived ambience and more means one is not in fact alone. And so, "The worldliness of being situated is the means by which we are attuned."<sup>16</sup> For Christians, an important measure of our attunement is found in the hymns we use in worship. Given Rickert's ambient rhetoric, what new conceptions of neighbor might be present in our cityscape hymnody?

#### AMBIENT READINGS OF THREE CITY HYMNS

To locate hymns with urban themes, I used the web-based search functions of two recent hymnals, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW) and *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (GtG). The word "city" appears seventeen times in the ELW and twenty-six times in GtG. The vast majority of these references, however, are not to actual cities in which singers dwell today, but to the eschatological "City of God" or other references to longed-for cities (e.g., "city on a hill"). This context noted, three city-themed hymns do relate to modern life in cityscapes.

"Now It Is Evening," *Fred Pratt Green* – *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #572

- 1 Now it is evening: lights of the city  
bid us remember Christ is our light.  
Many are lonely, who will be neighbor?  
Where there is caring, Christ is our light.
- 2 Now it is evening: food on the table  
bids us remember Christ is our life.  
Many are hungry, who will be neighbor?  
Where there is sharing, Christ is our life.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., xvii.

<sup>15</sup>Jeremy Cushman, *Thomas Rickert: Ambient Rhetoric*, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/80278881> (accessed September 1, 2016).

<sup>16</sup>Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 13.

- 3 Now it is evening: little ones sleeping  
bid us remember Christ is our peace.  
Some are neglected, who will be neighbor?  
Where there is caring, Christ is our peace.
- 4 Now it is evening: here in our meeting  
may we remember Christ is our friend.  
Some may be strangers, who will be neighbor?  
Where there's a welcome, Christ is our friend.

In 1971, Fred Pratt Green was described as a hymn writer who could “fill the gaps between the hymns of the first part of this century and the ‘far-out’ compositions that have crossed into some churches in the last decade or more.”<sup>17</sup> In the tightly composed “Now It Is Evening,” Green threads this needle, addressing the unusual theme of city (in an evening hymn, no less) while employing simple language, short sentences, and questions followed by an answer in the final line of each verse.

The hymn begins by setting a nocturnal scene, and focusing our gaze on the city's lights: “Now it is evening: lights of the city / bid us remember Christ is our light.” Having set our focus, however, the hymn states smoothly: “Many are lonely, who will be neighbor?” This question, modified only slightly by a refocused subject—the hungry, the neglected, those who are strangers—repeats each verse (e.g., “Some are neglected, who will be neighbor?”). The answer to each question describes Christ's presence as situationally dependent: “Where there is sharing, Christ is our life.”

In *Ambient Rhetoric*, Rickert describes Plato's use of the word *chōra* (also taken up, differently, by Derrida, Heidegger, Kristeva, and others). In short, Rickert argues that the *chōra*, in the context of the *polis*, means the countryside beyond the city and becomes fundamental to the spatial reality of the city itself. As a resident of the Twin Cities, this point seems particularly apt. The official geographic boundaries of Minneapolis-St. Paul are much less important than the flow from city to city to suburb to town. But these spatial connections are experienced vastly differently depending on factors that include how one travels, with whom one travels, and one's mindset while traveling.

The imaginative prose poems of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* further opens up Rickert's conception of *chōra* as interdependence, of us not just inhabiting spaces but spaces inhabiting us. The city of “Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel,” writes Calvino.<sup>18</sup> Further, “The city displays one face to the traveler arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea.”<sup>19</sup> The experience of how travelers approach the city, as seafarer or camel driver, wholly af-

<sup>17</sup>Hymn Society of America, “Seven New Hymns of Hope” (New York, 1971), [http://link.bu.edu/portal/Seven-new-hymns-of-hope-The-Hymn-Society-of-New/0S\\_V1avjLpA/](http://link.bu.edu/portal/Seven-new-hymns-of-hope-The-Hymn-Society-of-New/0S_V1avjLpA/) (accessed September 1, 2016).

<sup>18</sup>Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013) 17.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

fects their perception of the city, so much so that Calvino describes it as (perhaps) two separate places: “Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.”<sup>20</sup>

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Given this unpacking, the experience of final lines of Green’s hymn becomes affected by how the singer perceives being in the world. Just like one’s vantage of Despina, the view of the hymn is opened up by the answer to the rhetorical questions:

1. Many are lonely, who will be neighbor? / Where there is caring, Christ is our light.
4. Some may be strangers, who will be neighbor? / Where’s there’s a welcome, Christ is our friend.

Depending on the attunement of the singer, the hymn allows for various experiences and interpretations. For example, the line “Many are hungry, who will be neighbor?” is experienced drastically differently by a homeless worshiper with an empty stomach, someone with near-bare cupboards at home, and a singer who never lacks for food. Further, the ambience of the sanctuary—and whether the hymn is sung during a service of Holy Communion—also complicates the phrase “food on the table.” In sum, understood this way, Green’s hymn both draws out the elusive materiality of the city, as well as invites the singer to consider the nature of our own entangled attunement to it.

“O Holy City, Seen of John,” Walter Russell Bowie – Glory to God, #374

- 1 O holy city, seen of John,  
where Christ, the Lamb, does reign,  
within whose four-square walls shall come  
no night, nor need, nor pain,  
and where the tears are wiped from eyes  
that shall not weep again!
- 2 O shame to us who rest content  
while lust and greed for gain  
in street and shop and tenement  
wring gold from human pain,  
and bitter lips in deep despair  
cry, “Christ has died in vain!”

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 18.

- 3 Give us, O God, the strength to build  
the city that has stood  
too long a dream; whose laws are love,  
whose ways are servanthood,  
and where the sun that shines becomes  
your grace for human good.
- 4 Already in the mind of God  
that city rises fair.  
Lo, how its splendor challenges  
the souls that greatly dare,  
and bids us seize the whole of life  
and build its glory there.

Walter Russell Bowie's, "O Holy City, Seen of John" appears in more hymnals (72) than any other published text by Bowie.<sup>21</sup> First published in 1910, it remains a remarkably fresh, imaginative piece juxtaposing the vision of heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21–22) with the cities of the present. Bowie implores singers, having concentrated upon the beatific vision of the holy city, to respond by taking up their own building project, constructing a city "whose laws are love" and that shines grace. Rickert's notion of *kairos* further illuminates the possibilities for the hymn.

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For Rickert, *kairos* expands to awareness of not only time, but the connections of space, memory, architecture, community—ambience—and the expansive connections therein. While a simplified notion of layers does not quite do Rickert justice, consider the layers of city present in the text: the anticipatory holy city of Revelation, the urban realities of 1909 when the text was composed, an awareness of how racist twentieth-century housing policies still affect cities today,<sup>22</sup> and the actual city life experienced by the contemporary singer. The text employs the already/not-yet nature of apocalyptic writing to entangle the singer in an ambient awareness of life past, present, and to come. As I imagine the hymn being sung in a city church, my mind's eye perceives also how the surroundings of the sanctuary—old, or new—will affect the singing. For example, the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee, Florida, where I was raised, was built out of bricks

<sup>21</sup>Hymnary.org, "Walter Russell Bowie," 2016, [http://www.hymnary.org/person/Bowie\\_WR](http://www.hymnary.org/person/Bowie_WR) (accessed September 2, 2016).

<sup>22</sup>See Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>(accessed September 2, 2016).



from Col. Richard Shine's plantation. Shine served as elder in the congregation in the 1830s, and was also a slave owner. As the congregation's pastor noted in a recent sermon, "The blood and sweat of slaves is mixed into these bricks and into mortar that holds these walls together."<sup>23</sup> Such a realization of the ambient nature of worship space opens up even more room for meaning. For this congregation, then, singing "O shame to us who rest content" might blossom to include shame piqued by historical awareness of slavery, plus the possible shame felt by inaction or contented rest today. First Lady Michelle Obama's speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention homed in on the power of this juxtaposition. Obama described the United States as a place of both bondage and hope: "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves and I watch my daughters—two beautiful, intelligent, black young women—playing with their dogs on the White House lawn."<sup>24</sup> Singing hymns with Rickert's broad conception of *kairos* claims cities as places of overlapping, multilayered histories that expose our neighbors as both those who "wring gold from human pain" and as those themselves pained. Amidst the pain, though, we pray for "the strength to build" and dream anew.

*"All Who Love and Serve Your City," Erik Routley – Evangelical Lutheran Worship #724 and Glory to God #351*

- 1 All who love and serve your city,  
all who bear its daily stress,  
all who cry for peace and justice,  
all who curse and all who bless,
- 2 In your day of loss and sorrow,  
in your day of helpless strife,  
honor, peace, and love retreating,  
seek the Lord, who is your life.
- 3 In your day of wealth and plenty,  
wasted work and wasted play,  
call to mind the word of Jesus,  
"You must work while it is day."
- 4 For all days are days of judgment,  
and the Lord is waiting still,  
drawing near a world that spurns him,  
off'ring peace from Calv'ry's hill.
- 5 Risen Lord, shall yet the city  
be the city of despair?  
Come today, our judge, our glory.  
Be its name "The Lord is there!"

<sup>23</sup>Brant Copeland, "Hope," June 19, 2016, <https://brantcopeland.com/2016/06/19/hope/> (accessed September 3, 2016).

<sup>24</sup>Michelle Obama, "Remarks by the First Lady at the Democratic National Convention" (Philadelphia, July 25, 2016), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/25/remarks-first-lady-democratic-national-convention>.

In a beautiful exposé of sonic ambience, British hymnologist Erik Routley was driven to compose the text, “All Who Love and Serve Your City,” when he was unable to concentrate on his intended purpose—composing a tune—due to the sound of music emanating from a room next door. Mindful of the unrest in American cities such as Oakland, California, in 1967, Routley’s own attunement supported the composition. Carl Daw writes, “the peacefulness of the surrounding Scottish countryside made [Routley] even more aware of the distress those cities and others were suffering.”<sup>25</sup> The text casts a net both wide and narrow, opening with broad calls for “all” while adding particular city-minded descriptors for focus. Time, too, is made ambient by the phrase “in your day,” seemingly referring to the individual experience of those city dwellers. The voice of the hymn shifts from calling to the urban in verses one to four, to addressing Christ (“risen Lord”) in question and proclamation in verse five.

The hymn concludes with the unusual phrase, “Be its name, ‘The Lord is there!’” indicating a new name for the city that relies on the indwelling of God. For Christians, then, an ambient rhetoric may expand Rickert’s notion of being to include the presence of God—Holy Spirit—in their dwelling. While Rickert avoids theology, strictly speaking, he certainly appreciates that an ambient perspective may allow experiences of reality beyond simple explanation:

Worlding our sense of rhetoricity is not ultimately a matter of conscious apprehension, however, but a matter of dwelling: how, in our social organization, fourfoldly [see Heidegger] inherent to earth, sky, and whatever sense of the divine we are granted, we in turn, dependent already on them, further disclose them so as to grant their profound conditioning in all that we do and all that is.<sup>26</sup>

For Christian singers, then, the hymn can become a conditioning, that in asking God to name their city “The Lord is there!” we help bring about its redevelopment, its “reworlding” attuned to the promises of the faith. In other words, when Christians voice the final verse, we sing into existence our vision of reality, thereby attuning ourselves to an ambience of God’s presence. In our singing of the hymn, we claim God’s presence in the city, voicing the Lord’s dwelling amongst us as neighbor too.

During my first call in that rural Minnesota town, I developed the practice of having breakfast each Wednesday morning at the local diner. I would always take the next open chair at the long table in the center of the restaurant where I then caught up on the topics of the day: sports, who was sick, local school happenings, and always, the weather. Early on, I took a cynical view that much of my Wednesday morning conversation addressed the weather—it was the perfect punchline to a Minnesota joke. As a young pastor, I yearned for conversations with “more meaning.” Eventually, however, I came to appreciate that in northern Minnesota

<sup>25</sup>*Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016) 357.

<sup>26</sup>Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 284–285.

the weather *really matters*, and actually communicates great meaning. Farmers depend on the weather for their living. Blizzards still take lives. Tornadoes are not just the stuff of the Weather Channel. While I did not have the words then, that informal breakfast club was performing a basic exegesis of ambient rhetoric. Each storm recalled another from a past memory. A rain gauge in a field, when checked, reflected the ambience of the climate and crops, as well as drew in the smell of the field, the memory of checking that same gauge at this point in the season last year, and the reflection of looming clouds in the sky above. As we chatted at breakfast, our neighbors were not just those at the table, but all that attuned us to our experience of that moment including memories, smells, clothing, architecture, and feelings.

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Perhaps because cityscapes, unlike rural communities, are densely populated, the conception of our urban neighbor often focuses on people. And certainly, attuning to ambient rhetoric need not minimize seeking greater awareness of justice for human neighbors. But a focus on the traditional neighbor, that is, only our human “brothers and sisters” misses key aspects of how we live in this ambient age. The hymns above, when analyzed from an ambient perspective, take on even richer meaning. Empowered by this reading, clergy will find new ways of perceiving their community, whether urban or rural. Ministry becomes attuned to the ambient environs of place and neighbor, and the entanglements about, in, with, and for our mutual existence. Then, together, we might sing with all who love, serve, and are served by the city. ⊕

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